

Sandow Birk

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### American Qu'ran Makes a Sacred Text Familiar

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The artist Sandow Birk has created a illuminated manuscript of Islam's holy book that juxtaposes its writings with pictures of American life.

**NY**

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By appointment only

Sandow Birk spent the last nine years creating an illuminated manuscript of the Koran in English. He didn't do it for religious reasons—he's not a Muslim. Instead, the American artist wanted to undercut cultural prejudices about one of the world's most important religious texts, which Americans tend to associate with the Middle East and with violent extremists like ISIS. (The situation hasn't been helped by negative portrayals of Muslims in the media.) Birk's *American Qur'an*, which was exhibited in several gallery shows before being released this week in its entirety as a book, places translated passages next to cartoon-like illustrations, connecting the work with some of the most quotidian of American experiences: shooting hoops after school, fixing a flat tire, burying a loved one.

**WEB**

[www.cclarkgallery.com](http://www.cclarkgallery.com)

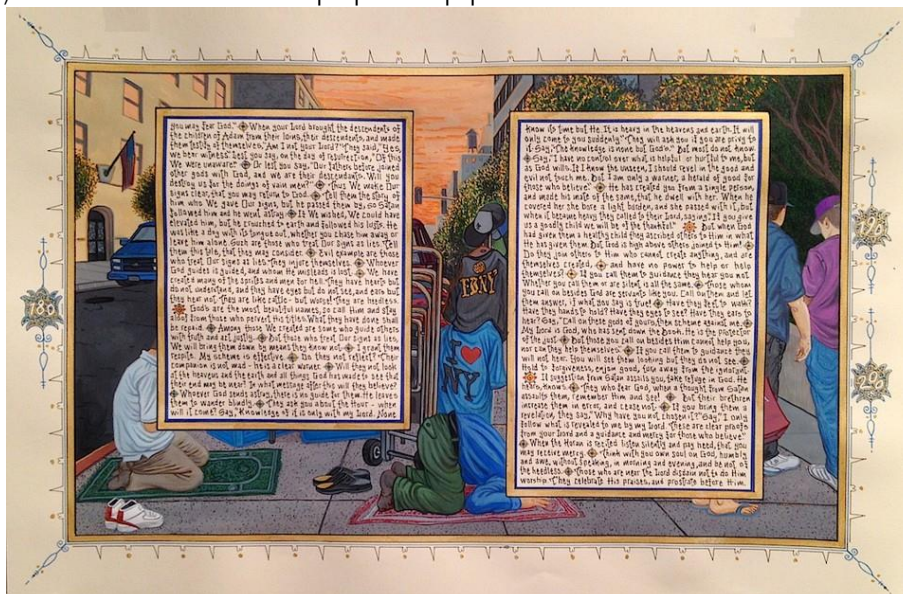
"You could make the argument that the Koran is the most important book in the world right now, and it has been for the last 20 years," Birk says. "And for Americans to not know what it says is a mistake." While Christianity is seen as a universal message, he says, despite its Middle Eastern origins, Christian Americans don't see Islam in the same way.

The urge to unpack this paradox ignited Birk's interest in the Koran. His version can't be considered authentic because it's not in Arabic; but his main goal was to create a cultural, not religious, text. He hand-transcribed the entire book using a calligraphy inspired by graffiti from his neighborhood in Los Angeles. But he kept the traditional formatting and structure, including margin size, ink color, page headings, and the medallions marking each verse. For the illustrations themselves, he flouts one of the fundamental laws of Islamic art: no representations of humans or animals. Instead, his illustrations feature an array of people who reflect the diversity of America.

For Birk, maintaining harmony between his own drawings and the passages was one of the most vital aspects of the project. To do that, he had to focus on the words themselves. He

found that many of the Koran's stories and morals resonated with his knowledge of the Bible, which he studied in art history class.

As the Yale professor Zareena Grewal writes in an essay that opens *American Qur'an*, Birk is driven in part by the question, "Why can't Islam be an American religion?" In one illustration, two Muslim men kneel on prayer rugs on the street in New York next to a vendor selling "I Love NY" t-shirts. Their faces are hidden, their ethnicities ambiguous. With this scene, Birk asks his audience to disentangle stereotypes of racial and religious identity. As Grewal notes, "Birk insists that we cannot know who is or is not Muslim just by looking at the people who populate the *American Qur'an*; the same holds true for the people who populate America."



Other illustrations comment on American foreign policy. Birk paired parts of the Koran that discuss preparing for war—passages often cited as proof Islam is violent—with scenes of Americans invading Iraq or of prisoners detained in Guantanamo Bay. In doing so, Birk wanted American readers to recognize the double standard implicit in the assumption that Islam condones fighting more than any other religion.

Another particularly haunting image depicts the Twin Towers on 9/11—Birk acknowledged that the project wouldn't be complete if he didn't address the attacks. The chapter, titled "Smoke," includes a passage about "a day when the sky will bring forth a smoke which will overwhelm the people," and focuses on the reactions of people on the ground. The scene, one of his earliest drawings, stretches across two pages.

“I’ve been more hesitant and self-doubting about this project than anything else I’ve ever done,” Birk [explained to \*The New York Times\*](#) in 2009. “I think the consequences of it being misunderstood are extreme.” Now, however, he’s less worried because the project has been generally well-received in the Muslim American community, especially among teenagers and young adults. He recalled how a group of Muslims was looking at his work in a gallery during mid-day prayer time, so they prayed on the floor beside his illustrations.

Still, some Muslim religious leaders have spoken out against the project, including Mohammad Qureshi of the Islamic Center of Southern California, who refused to visit the California gallery where Birk was showing several pages of *American Qur’an* in 2009. “The Koran is accessible the way it is,” Qureshi [told \*Art Daily\*](#). “It’s been accessible for 1,400 years.” Usman Madha, the director of public relations at the King Fahad Mosque in Culver City, [told \*The New York Times\*](#) in a critique of Birk’s work, “There is no such thing as an American Koran, or European Koran, or Asian Koran.”

But for Birk, the project is more than just a conversation starter or political statement. It fundamentally questions the role of a painter in the 21st century: to create something that is meaningful, relevant, and thought-provoking. “The idea of making an entire illuminated manuscript like the monks did in the Middle Ages—it’s something that only an artist can do,” he says. “My occupation is 500 years old: All my neighbors work in Hollywood, and here I am transcribing ancient texts. I’m very aware of the irony of that.”