

Sandow Birk

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Bringing the Qur'an to Life in America: Sandow Birk

By Ken Chitwood | Nov 05, 2015

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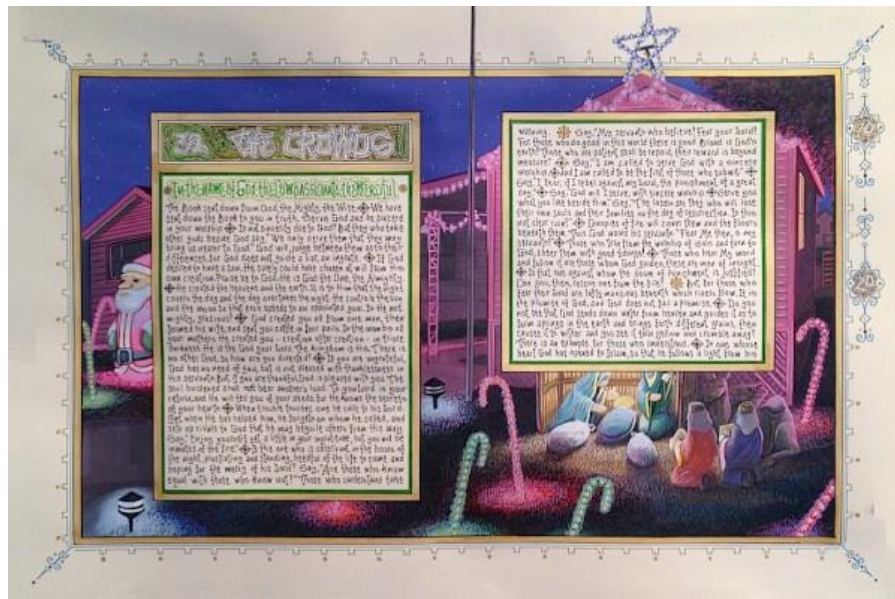
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Having delved into Christianity with the *Dante's Divine Comedy* series (Chronicle Books, 2006), artist Sandow Birk is now turning his attention to Islam in the book *American Qur'an* (Liveright, Nov.). In the book, one of PW's best books of 2015, Birk illustrates the Qur'an, using American life as the backdrop for the sacred writings—from the fields of Iowa to the beaches of Southern California. *PW* caught up with the graphic artist, who is not religious, to learn more about the nine-year project.

Why did you want to do this project, as opposed to another religious text?

I am not a believer, but that doesn't mean that other peoples' religion isn't essential to understand, and isn't relevant — often religion becomes an entry way into understanding the geopolitical world of our

times. I've been interested in other religious texts for a long time but with the course of world events, I became curious about the Qur'an.

What did you discover about the Qur'an through this project?

I worked on this project for so many years and I can honestly say that I found it to be continually interesting and very familiar. You see, the Qur'an sees itself as an extension of the Bible, just as the New Testament is to the Old, and it also assumes that you are familiar with the Bible, so it alludes to things that it expects you to know rather than explaining the from the beginning, like Genesis does. I learned new things every day.



Where do your illustrations of the Qur'an take place in Americana?

The Qur'an is no different than the Bible; people read the Bible, or go to church and listen to a sermon, and then leave and go to the supermarket and the ATM machine and stop to get the car washed, all while the moral messages are being pondered inside your head. So the scenes in my project are often of the most mundane aspects of life in America.

Every image is there for a reason and is metaphorically tied to passages in the Suras, or chapters, in which they appear [in the Qur'an]. The relationship isn't always obvious, but it's always there. And the images are

all scenes of life in our times. There is actually at least one scene from each of the fifty states. I really wanted the project to be “pan”-American in scope, and not just regional.



What has been the response from the Muslim community on the book?

It's been shown in various forms across the country throughout the years and the overwhelming response from the Muslim community has been one of surprise, amazement, interest, and enthusiasm, especially from younger Muslim-Americans.

What do you hope people will get out of engaging with this work?

This project is intended for those—like me—who are unfamiliar with the text, to whom are told that Islam is foreign, exotic, and “other.” I hope that Americans might consider the message of the Qur’an as it was intended, or as it claims to be, as a universal message from God to all human beings, no matter where you live or what language you speak. So I hope my metaphorical illuminations make the manuscript more engaging, thought-provoking, and interesting.