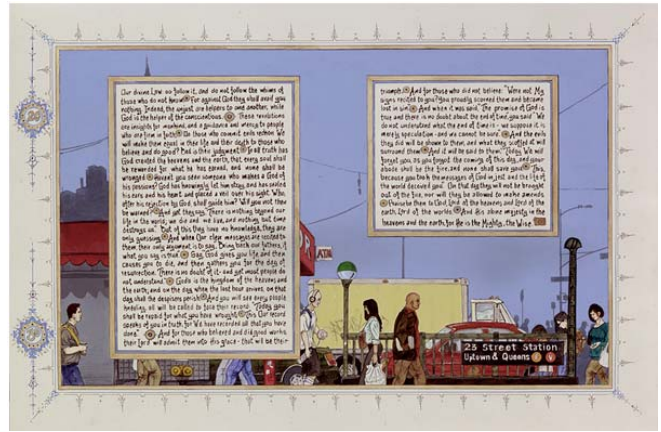
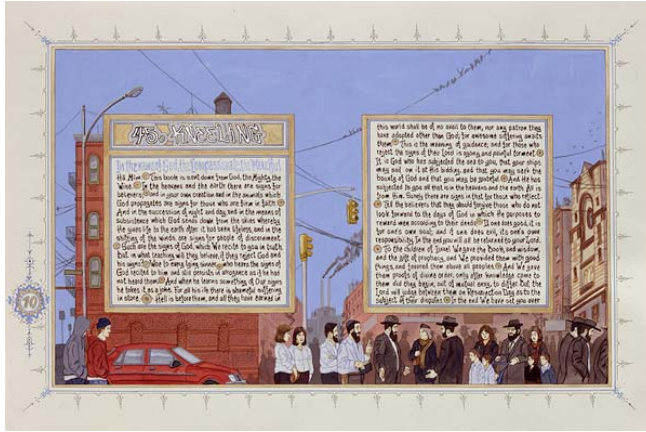




150 Minna Street
Ground Floor
San Francisco CA 94105
info@cclarkgallery.com
415.399.1439

American Qur'an By Sandow Birk



American Qur'an/Sura 45A and 45B, 2008

Genesis of the Concept:

I spent from 2001 to 2004 studying the complexities of Catholicism and 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 Dore'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 most often heard are that Islam is a religion of extreme and flawed beliefs--beliefs completely foreign and contrary to those valued by our own 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.

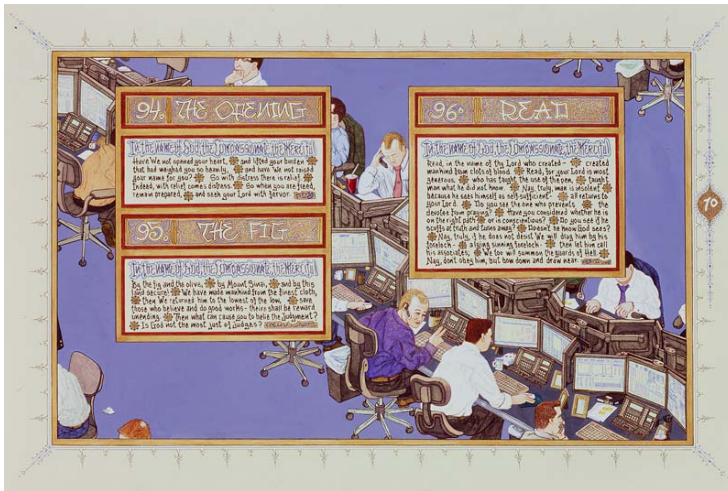
After having spent time studying the Christian view of the afterlife and its harsh judgment of who will go where and how they will be treated by God when they get there, I wondered: How bizarre, different, and incomprehensible could Islam be? How are Islamic ideas of heaven anymore unusual or extreme 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?

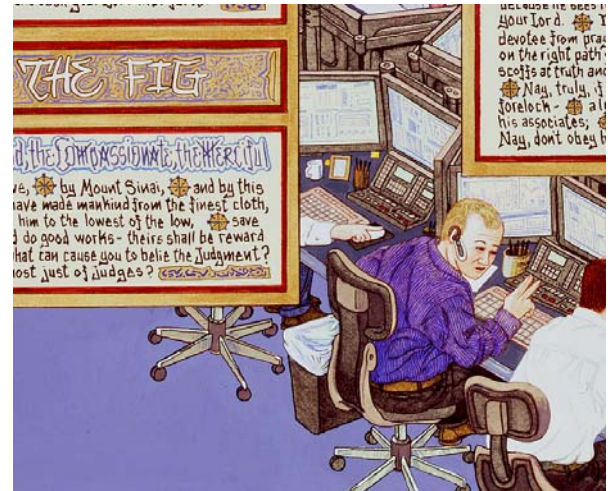
Can Islamic beliefs really be so different, so impenetrable to Westerners?

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.



American Qur'an/Sura 94-95-96, 2008



detail

Initial Concept:

My initial concept was to create an entirely hand-made, hand-written, illustrated, colored, illuminated, and bound manuscript of an English translation of the Holy Qur'an, based on traditional models, but illuminated with illustrations that tie the text to contemporary American society, events, and lifestyles. The book would be more than 300 pages, and would be bound in gold stamped and embossed leather in the traditions of Arabic codices from the 7th through 11th centuries.

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 Muhammed 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 various 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. The suras are not arranged in the Qur'an 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 Muhammed in Arabic, and the true 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. The words of the Qur'an are considered to be the verbatim words of God Himself.

Each of the 114 suras 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 Muhammed 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.

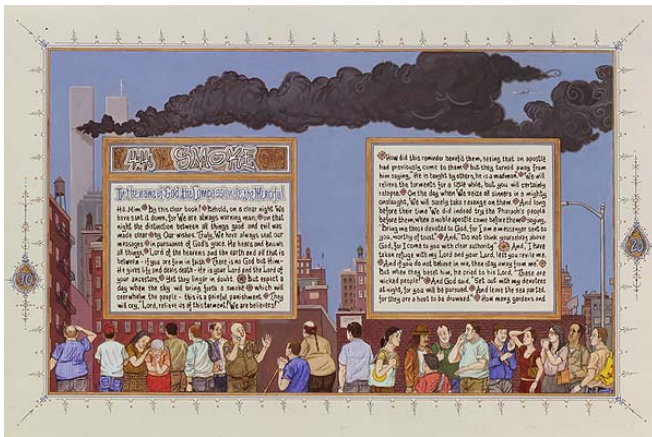
Early Qur'ans were expensive to produce, elaborate, and beautiful. Frequently they were displayed on wooden stands to hold them for easier reading, and they were usually bound in leather covers with a flap and a thong to secure them, often with extensive gold stamping and decoration on the covers.

Project Proposal:

For this project, I am producing an authentic version of the Qur'an in contemporary English, illuminated by hand with scenes of American life that relate to the text. I am hand-writing and painting every page, and will eventually produce some form of printed book from the originals. The original works on paper each measuring 16 x 24 inches and that illustrate the 114 chapters of the Qur'an will ultimately number more than 300 pages. 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 project is titled *American Qur'an*.

As in the 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 calligraphy 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, and engaged in daily activities that relate to the text of the Qur'an.



American Qur'an/Sura 44A and 44B, 2008

