



AiA Art News-service

# The Guardian

## Saatchi Gallery covers up artworks after Muslim visitors' complaints

**Paintings by SKU deemed blasphemous for combining Islamic text with nude images**

**Jim Waterson**

Sun 5 May 2019 17.15 BST Last modified on Mon 6 May 2019 00.40 BST



The Saatchi Gallery in London was founded by the advertising magnate Charles Saatchi. Photograph: Greg Balfour Evans/Alamy

A leading contemporary art gallery covered up works featuring an Islamic declaration of faith after complaints from Muslim visitors who said the artworks were blasphemous.

The Saatchi Gallery in west London hosted an exhibition of new material by the artist SKU featuring a variety of works. However, it decided to cover up two paintings that incorporated the text of the shahada, one of the five pillars of Islam, in Arabic script juxtaposed with images of nude women in the style of the US flag.

The gallery, founded by the advertising magnate [Charles Saatchi](#), rejected calls from some visitors to remove the paintings, arguing it was up to visitors to come to their own conclusions on the meaning of the art. However, in response to the complaints, SKU suggested as a compromise the works should remain on the gallery wall but be covered up with sheets.

“It seemed a respectful solution that enables a debate about freedom of expression versus the perceived right not to be offended,” he said [in a statement to the Sunday Times](#).



## **Eyewitness: Saatchi Gallery, London**

The Saatchi Gallery told the newspaper it “fully supported” freedom of artistic expression. “The gallery also recognises the sincerity of the complaints made against these works and supported the artist’s decision to cover them until the end of the exhibition,” it said.

The pseudonymous London-based artist has no social media accounts or public presence and takes their name from the retail term for a “stock keeping unit”. The exhibition, *Rainbow Scenes*, was billed as exploring “how we, as individuals, are subjected to wider cultural, economic, moral and political forces in society”.

Among other issues it dealt with were “the impact of these forces on us individually as we absorb such influences into our minds and our bodies”, the promotion of values in “symbols and propaganda” and an encouragement to the public “to reboot the world”. The exhibition ran from mid-April and finished on Friday.

Previous attempts to cover up works of art on public display have sometimes backfired, notably when Edinburgh airport decided to [cover up a Picasso painting](#) of a nude woman. Last year a row broke out [among frustrated visitors](#) to the stately home of Cragside in Northumberland after the National Trust decided to hide all artworks featuring men in order to celebrate the life of Margaret Armstrong, the wife of a 19th-century industrialist.