

A Brief for Christian Kitsch

'Kitsch', as applied to art-objects, is usually a term of insult. To call a painting or a musical composition or a piece of decorative art kitschy is to suggest that it's crude, cheap, unsophisticated, unoriginal, mass-produced, and above all sentimental. It's Norman Rockwell's urchins, it's Soviet-era statues of gigantically heroic workers, it's angels and kittens (especially together), it's flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark, it's velvet Elvises, it's Kylie Minogue, it's the 1812 Overture and the 'Star Wars' theme, and it's the coathanger and the Sacred Heart that you can see on this page.

Such things lack, above all else, nuance. They leave you in no doubt about how you're to respond to them, and they may move you toward self-congratulation on responding to them as you do. As you sigh with warm sadness at the sight of Jesus's sacred heart, or as a tear comes to your eye at the thought of hanging your coat on his crucified hands (you'll probably need to be Catholic for the first and Protestant for the second), you'll also likely feel, for a moment, pleased that you're the kind of person able to respond in that way.

Kitsch is, on this account, trash; and you, to the extent that you like it, are trashy. You ought to be ashamed of yourself and go to some art appreciation classes at once.

So runs the anti-kitsch argument. It's a finely-tuned instrument of class hatred. Those who offer it are typically people who know what kitsch is, don't like it, and want to educate others out of liking it. The vehemence with which they argue is usually tightly linked to the extent to which they used, once, to be kitsch-lovers themselves.

Christians ought to pause before accepting all this. Christianity, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, has been and remains among the great generators of kitsch, and that's because Christianity is and always has been a religion of peasants and proles. Most Christian art is and always has been kitsch: that's what most Christians like. They -- we -- like it exactly because it's nuance-free. The stations of the cross, present on the walls of every Catholic Church, aren't subtle and aren't supposed to be. They're there to conform you by way of contemplation to the bloody sufferings of Christ. The American Protestant praise song -- Jesus is your boyfriend, it seems usually to be saying, over and over again -- is likewise unsubtle, and it too is supposed to be. It's there to conform you to the love of Christ.

The hushed, museum-trained gaze of the acolytes of the aesthetic, those for whom kitsch is either revolting or pathetic, is not well designed for these purposes. That gaze values subtlety, complexity, ambiguity, irony, and (above all) novelty. Its most characteristic grace-note is self-congratulation at being the kind of person who likes this rare and beautiful thing, whatever it may be, laced always with contempt for those too crude, too uneducated, or too simple, to be able do so. None of that is remotely acceptable to Christians.

But hasn't Christianity also been the home of and stimulus for great, non-kitschy art? Haven't Christians made beautiful as well as kitschy things? Aren't there connoisseurs among Christians? Yes. And that can be celebrated, too, if you're among the tiny minority of Christians to have a care for it. But it's not the main event. The main event in Christian art is kitsch, which is exactly as it should be. Among Christians, the connoisseur has much more to learn from the kitsch-lover than the other way around.

If you go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, you'll see there the slab on which Jesus' body is supposed to have been laid out after having been deposed from the cross. You'll also see pilgrims taking turns to lie on it, some writhing and wailing as they conform themselves to Jesus' death. That's a kitsch-response; the connoisseur is unlikely to be able to make it.

Can we then not make distinctions between the beautiful and the kitschy, between the Christian coathanger and the Rublev's icons or Velazquez' virgo assumpta? Can we not say that Christian high art is more beautiful than what you'll find in the souvenir stores of Lourdes, or in the Precious Moments™ catalog? We can say this, and even argue for it; but it's not easy (it raises some of the most difficult questions in the philosophy and theology of art), and attempting it is a hobby for the leisured few. What they do is at the very margins of the sacred page, if it's there at all; what kitsch-producers and kitsch-lovers do is, by contrast, at the center.

This is a fallen world. Both kitsch-love and connoisseurship have their deformities. But the former is much closer to Jesus' beating heart than is the latter.

Paul J. Griffiths
Duke Divinity School
First draft 7/17/11