The Desecration of Christ

by RICHARD EGENTER

Translated by EDWARD QUINN

Edited by NICOLETE GRAY

FRANCISCAN HERALD PRESS
CHICAGO · ILLINOIS 60609

BRESCIA COLLEGE LIBRARY
OWENSBORO, KENTUCKY
This is a translation and adaptation of Kitsch and Christenleben (Buch-Kunstverlag Ettal) with an Epilogue by Nicolete Gray.


Imprimatur: ☥ Patrick Casey, Vicar-General.
Westminster, 13 February 1967

The Nihil obstat and Imprimatur are a declaration that a book or pamphlet is considered to be free from doctrinal or moral error. It is not implied that those who have granted the Nihil obstat and Imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.

Contents

Chapter Page
Editor's Foreword 9

Part One: WHAT IS KITSCH?

I. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

II. ART AND MORALITY
The Artist and Morality, p. 31—Morality and the Beholder, p. 36.

III. THE ORIGINS OF KITSCH
With the Artist, p. 38—The Origin of Kitsch in the Viewer, p. 50—What then is Kitsch? p. 53.

IV. KITSCH AND THE WORLD TODAY
Introduction

Is kitsch a sin? There can be no simple answer to such a question. It raises complicated issues which require careful analysis.

The question, Is kitsch a sin? may be countered with another: Is stupidity a sin? But one speaks of “criminal stupidity”. There is also criminal kitsch.

The marriage between art and the Church is fruitful, but it has not always been happy. The Church has at various times found it necessary to oppose decadence in art. Art also sometimes has had to fight for the right to assert its true nature. It is a human activity willed by the Creator, with its own dignity and mission. When shortsighted pastoral zeal robs it of these essential qualities, then they must be vindicated; particularly when it is Christian truth and the fullness of Christian life which the art in question is expected to express.

It would therefore be disastrous if Christian ethics and pastoral theology refused to concern themselves with the problem of kitsch. It may seem a marginal consideration but if kitsch is allowed to persist, if we train ourselves not to notice the instances as they pile up, we are allowing it to create a scandal which drives people out of the Church, or deprives them of life within it. The argument of this book will perhaps make it clear that the Father of lies possesses in kitsch a wonderfully flexible and effective
What is Kitsch?

means of turning the masses away from salvation. The dominion of kitsch over Catholic life during the past century has been at times almost absolute; to what extent has this been responsible for the falling away of the masses from Christian life? In our own country, how many would be converts has it repulsed? Can we be sure that it plays no part in the lapse rate? No doubt during this period the whole question of the relation between art and a rapidly changing society has created general problems, but have there not also been sins of omission on the part of those who had eyes to see and did not see? Sometimes omissions and sins of omission are more dangerous than the most monstrous crimes.

Kitsch is not merely a question of taste, it strikes at man himself, his moral health and salvation. In this work the writer, being a moral theologian, will approach the subject from the standpoint of Christian ethics rather than from the aesthetic standpoint. However, the moral theologian must also deal with what is aesthetically significant, even though he cannot claim to pass judgment. His is the last word, but he must also welcome, and pay attention to, the evidence of artists and art historians.

How can Kitsch be recognized?

Sometimes an examination of a word and its derivation will elucidate its meaning. "Kitsch" is not derived from any German root. It has been suggested that it originated in Munich and comes from the English word "sketch" (Skizze), being used to describe the inferior artefacts made to please, or to take in, the nineteenth-century tourist. However that may be, kitsch has nothing to do with "sketch". A taste for kitsch is very often a taste for something complete in every detail.
What is Kitsch?

ing into kitsch; painting such as Carlo Dolci’s Saint (Plate 1) or Richard Wagner’s song The Angel come perilously near; the gifted artist is certainly not immune. Does the kitsch lie perhaps in some lack of proper connection between words and music, in some lack of suitability between the subject and its treatment? In extreme examples, where a coquettish pious innocent is imposed on us as a saint, or when our longing for heaven is served up in a sentimental hymn there is no mistaking that there is a crass divergence between what the artist claims to be expressing and what is actually represented. Here we are surely nearer to the heart of the matter, and in this case it would seem that the roots of kitsch must lie somewhere in the creative, or would-be creative experience of the artist—or in the response of the beholder. If we are to arrive at a more precise definition, if we are to understand the morally disintegrating effect of kitsch, we must first briefly analyse these two types of experience. It is clear that the diagnosis is complex and delicate.

Aesthetic Experience

The Experience of the Creative Artist

We speak of the creative activity. It would be more accurate to use the word “procreative”. Art is begotten, not made. The artist experiences a tension which seeks release, and the fruit of this experience is a new entity; a new structure which cannot be excogitated, but which the artist accepts as a gift, a grace, which grows in him, and which he brings to birth, often painfully and arduously. It is characteristic of the artistic experience that it involves no direct gratification of instinct or purposive realization of talents. On the contrary, it is out of a deliberate renunciation of such immediate and actual satisfaction that works of art emerge; indeed they are often born out of suffering, when the artist finds himself confronted by an inner reality which he must pursue though it run counter to his own wishes and plans. (Not that the artist himself in the moment of creation needs to understand his own activity, or to watch over or analyse his own action; like procreation it is a mystery, a gift.) That which the artist receives in his moment of inspiration he transforms, clarifies, and deepens with the intensity of his feeling into an image of the mind. And out of this image, which is part of itself, his creative energy forms and moulds a work of art perceptible to sense.

But no artist living in the world of men works for himself alone; in his work he seeks not just self-expression, but
V

The Breeding Ground of Kitsch and its Moral Effects

We have seen where kitsch is liable to find its way into the process of artistic creation and enjoyment. Let us now consider it from the other end, from the point of view of the man, and his moral and spiritual life.

Original Sin

None of us is magically protected from kitsch. Not only may we fall foul in matters of art, but we are also liable to do the same thing spiritually, and take refuge in similar types of experience. The theologian sees the roots of this in original sin.

Even the redeemed feel the effects of original sin. Harmony between different levels of life and instinct, established by grace, are liable to be destroyed in us by original sin; concupiscence or inordinate desire becomes particularly and painfully obvious in the conflict between spirit and flesh. (For a proper appreciation of art it is important to realize that the biblical expressions "flesh" and "spirit" are not to be identified with our modern concepts of body and soul-spirit; in the New Testament both words specifically describe the whole man, the one in the order of damnation, the other in that of salvation.)

Art of its very nature demands that there should be harmony between spiritual values and the experience of their sensible expression; for this reason, the disorder caused by original sin is liable particularly to offset it. All art is of the senses; and generally also sensually enjoyable. The disorder of original sin is likely, therefore, to introduce an unbalanced emphasis on the sensible and its promise of pleasure. Dishonesty is very liable to creep in where someone's personal response to the spiritual values of the artist's inspiration are distorted.

The passive receptive element in aesthetic experience provides another danger for both the creator and the beholder or listener. For the latter there is an opening for sloth and mere pleasure seeking, which becomes dishonest when the pretext of an aesthetic response is maintained. For the artist, the fact that the creative process involves an element of fantasy, even of intoxication, before the starting-point of his inspiration is transformed, its inner value captured, means that, as a result of original sin, the artist can easily lapse into a dream world. For from both artist and beholder, art, as we have seen, demands effort and seriousness; when this is not made, artistic activity becomes a flight from reality. It can become not only a bogus reflection of reality but an opening for the devil. Satan can present himself as an angel of light more strikingly, and much more easily, in an artistic symbol than in a scientific concept.

Timidity and Emotional Immaturity

In our present world artistic experience is always in danger of misleading us and of falsifying reality. Even one who lives in the mind and truth of Christ, even he "who thinks he stands firmly should beware of a fall" (1 Cor. 10.12). Pious timidity or lack of flexibility may try to avoid the difficulties by taking short-cuts. To do this is to
What is Kitsch?

abandon God's gift of art in pusillanimous fear; it is falling into the error of Tertullian when he says, "Where virtue rules, beauty is of no account; for beauty properly speaking serves only to rouse sensual pleasure."

We are all subject to the effects of original sin, but in practice some temperaments are more open to the particular dangers of kitsch than others. To begin with, true appreciation of art demands a "big and simple heart", it demands a capacity for profound experience, a certain degree of emotional depth and maturity, the power to feel the great as great, the pure as pure, the profound as profound. Some people lack such a capacity; the mental defective, the psychopath with a feeble emotional response, people who are inadequately gifted in this field, these are liable to have no idea of the nature of a real response to art, and are therefore more or less without the power to resist kitsch.

It may be, however, that a disposition to kitsch is accounted for not so much by lack of capacity to respond to art as by arrested development, inadequate education, or by the weariness of the absorbing struggle to gain a bare livelihood. Modern depth-psychology has shown the disastrous effect of such conditions. For us it is relevant that an undeveloped or repressed emotional life presents an ideal breeding ground for kitsch. We have already touched on this problem in relation to sentimentality and noted the modern atrophy of feeling, which is particularly liable to affect religious life by exposing it frequently to kitsch. It is sad to see this ascendency of sentimentality as it grows in the life of the individual. Religious life becomes poverty-stricken and egocentric, and we tend to belittle the importance of truth in our faith and to lose the idea of piety as a direct face-to-face encounter with God. As these attitudes gain ascendency in our minds, so we come more and more to misplace the focal point of religion in relation to our emotional lives. People who are cool and calculating in practical life, who pursue their political and economic aims with ruthless logic, think that their religious lives should be governed by feeling only. The result of these demands on their already stunted emotional resources is sentimentality, and this seizes upon every form of kitsch which it encounters.

The same emotional weakening of religious life may be found among simple devout people for whom piety may virtually take over the whole of their active life, so that other interests are undeveloped or atrophied through neglect. They naturally expect some return from this piety; what more natural than that they should give way to kitsch which offers so many opportunities of sentimental satisfaction to those who expect little of life?

Repressed Sex

Religious kitsch proliferates especially when the world of sexual love is not known, accepted, and built into our personal life in its God-willed bodiliness, and this is so even when it is precisely for religion's sake that sex has been repressed—instead of having been sacrificed with open eyes. Bert Herzog, who deserves credit for having demonstrated the subconscious influences in the origin of kitsch, has expressed himself forcefully on this point: "I may be allowed to point to one piece of kitsch which even today infects ninety out of a hundred churches; that horror, painted, carved, or made of plaster, which is called 'the Virgin Mary', 'the Immaculate Conception', 'Our Lady of Lourdes', and so on. It is in fact not accidental that Mary here almost always appears as a sweet girl, more precisely as a curious combination of courtesan and goddess, for these images make manifest nothing of Mary the Mother
What is Kitsch?

of God, but rather (although this is naturally not admitted and is often also unconscious) the feminine part of man’s soul—still in a primitive state—his undifferentiated anima. If we consider coolly these dolls made of marzipan and cosmetics looking upward with cowlike glances supposed to be ‘soulful’, this artificial set-up, this excessive affectation, behind which a lascivious element often lurks, then we can perceive more or less exactly the secret idea which many men have of the feminine nature. And indeed, those who produce and buy this kitsch are for the most part men, parish priests and church leaders—in this respect it is significant that modern Marian kitsch often resembles to a hair’s breadth certain film stars, even to the rosy painted kissable lips. Amazingly little survives here of theology and of the fine distinctions of nearly two thousand years of Mariology; I have always been surprised that priests who have been trained in theology, not only themselves enjoy such products of a corrupt and perverted religious outlook, but also commend them to the devotion of the faithful. We must ask ourselves: What will these souls look like after they have been devastated by such pictures of the Mother of God? and what does the charge ‘care of souls’ mean in this respect ... ?" 1 These are very strong words, but are we sure that we can maintain that the author is wholly wrong?

We cannot fail to recognize the importance of such (depth) psychological reflections. We might naturally point also to the often repressed animus function in woman, which leads her also, in the religious sphere, to the choice of a picture of Christ which is kitsch.

Religious Decadence

It is not only an unbalanced emotional life which opens the door to kitsch in religion, but also neglect of religious life itself. A person who has never in his own soul confronted the Godhead, who has not, in more precise terms, encountered the (triune) personality of God in a direct (I-Thou) relationship, cannot grasp the depths of reality. One who does not fully comprehend the indispensability of moral norms will be defenceless against the falsifying of artistic experience through kitsch—particularly where it purports to be religious art. Not that this is necessarily the fault of the individual; the religion of a whole age can be metaphysically shallow.

In fact, since the Middle Ages, as a result of increasing individualism, religious experience has become more and more superficial. Its focal point has moved away from the profound centre of the sacred mysteries into peripheral areas of subjective feelings and beyond that to sentimental devotions. As people lost their understanding of the depth of the liturgical mysteries, they lost also their power to use the language of sacred symbols. Religious art lost its symbolic character. If we consider the transition from the majesty of the Romanesque church, planned for communal worship, through the religious individualism reflected in the crown of ambulatory chapels so typical of the Gothic cathedral, to the rococo hermitage and the Lourdes grotto of the nineteenth century, we realize the long distance that we have travelled. When religion itself is no longer capable of making people aware of the immensity of its measure, they are almost bound to be taken in by kitsch.

Collectivization

Today this danger is overshadowed by an even greater; the metaphysical shallowness induced by the collectiviz-
What is Kitsch?

The breeding ground of kitsch and its moral effects

What is Kitsch?

tion of all our activities. All standardization, particularly when it is a levelling down, is at the expense of the individual personality, and means that life grows shallower, more impoverished. Collective man is concerned with the utilitarian and the pleasurable, not with the life of the spirit. The danger of kitsch is overshadowed by the sinister danger of a blindness to all those values which make life worth living, a blindness which may become complete. Naturally a life so superficial, so adapted to utility and pleasure will be wide open to all forms of kitsch; but, compared with the truly diabolical despoiling of humanity in collectivization this is a slight evil. Were this process successful, there would no longer be any point in fighting against kitsch; but so long as it is in the balance the fight is worth while, because it constantly brings up and proclaims true, the metaphysical depths of human existence. The fight against kitsch helps to prevent life becoming depersonalized and entirely superficial; it is therefore also part of the fight to save our lives from the threat of collectivization and its attendant stagnation.

Unbalanced Extremes in the Understanding of Art

We have already referred to those who seem to lack any gift for the understanding of art, and we shall return to this, but let us first consider at the other end of the scale, those who idolize beauty. "Beauty is everywhere around us . . . it is a strange flower and blooms in the most unlikely places, but whatever the soil, once it burgeons it can hardly be destroyed. Remove it from one spot and it will blossom in another, and often in the least considered place. It is proper to mankind alone and it magnifies the man who kneels before it, pouring into his trembling and ecstatic heart all the things that make the life of man worth while." With these words, Adalbert Stifter, in his Brigitta, makes clear that we have in beauty a mysterious, primitive datum which pervades all human fields of value, which cannot be fully grasped by means of logical thought or conceptual analysis, or reduced to values of another order—moral values, for instance. And here we have two dangers. The first we have already mentioned; idolization of the beautiful. Delight in beauty can be so intoxicating that we go no further, we allow it to prevent and waylay us in our search for God, instead of leading us to him, its source. As St Augustine wrote, "The eyes love fair and varied forms, bright and soft colours. Let not these occupy my soul; let God rather occupy it who made these things, very good indeed, yet he is my good, not they." We have noted the error of the doctrine of art for art's sake. Morally the danger of allowing aesthetic values to absorb those of holiness and morality is obvious. In relation to kitsch the greatest danger is social. People, particularly teachers, who transmit the intoxication of their own experience to others who are less gifted, and incapable of the same response, expose the latter to the lure of kitsch.

Today our mood is perhaps too disillusioned for this to be a great temptation, we may associate it more with the aestheticism of the nineties. But an obvious contemporary example is to be found in the aesthetic approach to the liturgy, with its tendency to regard the beauty of ritual and music as something complete in itself—an approach which is perhaps more common outside than inside the Church. Outside the Church, among those at sea in a world of shifting values, where nothing is secure or true, art is often felt to be the one valid experience, since its validity is self-subsistent and independent of all outside considerations. As a beginning, this is the recognition of art as a saving God-given gift to man in periods of doubt and fear,
What is Kitsch?
a personal contact with the true and the real. But the sophisticated “pop-art” of today, in its deliberate frivolity, is surely an example of a refusal to go beyond art, a turning back of art upon itself, denying its spiritual mission; and therefore kitsch.

The second danger for the gifted is with those who may be highly educated and intelligent, but who have no understanding of the language of beauty. Lack of balance between the superior level of the rest of their lives and their complete lack in this respect predestines them to kitsch. They often mistake the purpose of art, considering it as meant merely to provide pleasure and relaxation, as in fact an extra, fundamentally unnecessary. Beauty takes its revenge on these masters of sober thought and upright will (one cannot help thinking of senior British civil servants), and entices them to a plane that lies far below the art to which they give only lip service, namely to the plane of kitsch. Such people will look at a work of art very probably seeing only its subject and passing from this, not to the inner image of the artist, but to their own related interests and associations—possibly even trying to find in it ethical, religious or political ideas, regardless of the intention of the artist. Judgment may be given, not on artistic content, but on skill and technique, whether the grapes are so real that a bird might peck them, or on failure to reach such a standard of realism, when it may not have been in any way what the artist wanted to do. To take an extreme example, suppose someone lacking in all aesthetic appreciation were to stand before Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel; he would be blind to the beauty of the fresco, and therefore fail to be touched inwardly by the unique evocation of man’s creatureliness; to him it would be just a representation of a naked body, in the same class as an anatomical drawing or a photograph from the life; instead of responding to the wonderful relationship between this living form and its Creator, he might have to cope with erotic-sexual suggestions.

In this extreme example we can perhaps see just what is really involved. The man who lacks aesthetic sensibility will be in danger because he will see only what is on the surface, only the representational aspect of a work of art and its associations. He may find a superficial charm in these and so enjoy a trashy experience and become involved in kitsch.

The causes of these types of aesthetic failure would seem to be four. It may lie in a person’s psycho-physical make-up; he may be tone-deaf, or colour blind, or blind to the beauty of form, in varying degrees. Or it may be in lack of imagination, or lack of imaginative experience, through lack of opportunity. Here clearly those who are gifted and fortunate can help those who need to be shown the way, to be fired by others, before they can begin to see the deeper meaning and beauty embodied in the sensible forms of art. Thirdly, the capacity may be there, but retarded in its development by false ideas, perhaps owing to a very active way of life in scientific, technical or educational work, and sometimes a wrong approach to asceticism. We have to be humble and accept the importance, the necessity of leisure, and the duty to respond to the infinite riches of God and his creation. Work directed to good and useful ends is still inferior and incomplete without the creative work which God also has required and empowered men to do. Finally, there may be real value-blindness to art, and then there is nothing for it but honest humble resignation. Such people may be called to sublime learning, to activity of social importance, to holiness, but they must be silent in the face of beauty which they cannot understand.
What is Kitsch?

stand, and not allow an intellectual acquaintance with art to delude them (or others) into thinking that they have had an experience which is in fact denied to them. When they are in charge of cultural affairs their most seemly attitude is to refrain from interfering, and generously to leave the task to those with the vocation.

Self-indulgence

Beyond the lack of capacity for true artistic experience—for whatever cause—there lies the case of the person who has lost his capacity through self-indulgence. Someone who has never learnt to accept life as it is, who will not face up to the fact that it is only by self-mastery that we enter into the order of reality, someone who has never learned a self-forgetting approach to another person, but who instead relates everything to himself, making it serve his own interests; such a man will treat beauty in the same way, and will be particularly open to kitsch. “There are people who are pleased with the trivial, sentimental, sweetly tasteless, cheaply effective, sensational, and who look for these qualities in art. The noble and profound quality of true art, which avoids all cheap effects, does not appeal to them and is not able to arouse their enthusiasm... it is not merely that they look for something in art which does not belong to art but to another sphere of life, but that they look for qualities which are negative and perverted also in life” (Dietrich von Hildebrand).

The only hope in such a case is complete change of heart.

VI

Moral Ineptitude as the Heart of Kitsch

We must take up a question which has constantly recurred in our analysis. It seems that it is more exact to describe kitsch as morally valueless than as lacking beauty. Because kitsch always claims to appear in the guise of the beautiful, it has been thought of as something which belongs in the aesthetic sphere, which can therefore be just set aside, with indignation perhaps, possibly just with a rueful or contemptuous smile. Too little notice has been taken of the way in which it can contribute to moral breakdown. And in this respect straightforward kitsch is particularly dubious because it may not be realized as such; and so its work of moral attrition goes on unnoticed. The reason for this under-estimation of the power of kitsch is often due to a blindness to the value of beauty and its importance for the morally good and devout life. Those who fail to appreciate beauty will fail also to see the full significance of its corruption.

Untruthfulness, Irreverence, Shamelessness

As soon as we look at kitsch from the ethical point of view its deceitfulness becomes obvious. A kitsch product presents itself as the artistic rendering of something real. In the same way a kitsch experience is one which assumes
What is Kitsch?

that the true value-content of a work of art has been grasped. Whereas in neither case has there been any personal achievement of this kind, but something inferior; the claim is bogus.

We normally apply the words “bogus” and “spurious” in the first instance to things. Do they also necessarily have a moral implication? In characteristic kitsch—such as the plaster statues of our Lady of Lourdes—we have work which deliberately represents something different from the supposed subject. (We have Bernadette’s testimony that they are historically untrue: “My lady was much more natural and not a bit tired-looking; she wasn’t praying all the time.”) In these images someone has aimed at producing an attractive female form under the pretext of religion, whether from frivolous irresponsibility or in calculating a more favourable market. The dishonesty may not be conscious; in straightforward kitsch the devout artist may be unaware of the bogus quality of his work because its roots are in his whole attitude to life. The typical “Immaculate Virgin” does not represent any religious reality; the holiness or virginity, suggested by a lily perhaps or some other outward sign, is not present in any spiritual sense in the artist’s conception. Here is a spuriousness which is based on a more or less conscious untruthfulness. What the artist conceals from himself, or from others, what he seeks to promote deliberately or otherwise, behind the bogus façade, is very often sensual pleasure.

If a work of art is used not for beauty, its specific quality, but for some other lower purpose, then there is irreverence, even if the other purpose is by way of being in the service of morality and religion. All kitsch is irreverent, no matter how pious it claims to be, because it abuses or parodies the proper values of art.

Everything has its own value; if this is ignored, or if

Moral Ineptitude as the Heart of Kitsch

man uses it as a means to some other end, then he is irreverent. With lesser values this may be excused on grounds of inattentiveness; it is easy to overlook a daisy. But with the higher value of beauty, this irreverence is patently an offence against God, the Creator and primal essence of the beautiful. It is the first step to the sin of pride, to the self-glorification and self-sufficiency of the creature. When a man no longer looks around him to notice the wonder of created things, or does not trouble to respond to them; when he ignores real values in order to devote himself to his own interests and desires, he is already on the point of revolting against God. Such irreverence is particularly liable to occur in the field of art, and it is not only the pleasure seeker who is at risk, but paradoxically also his opposite, the moral zealot. The puritan, who is so strict in maintaining moral standards, is apt to be proportionately lax in his attention to the divine message which art transmits. By the irony of divine wisdom, his punishment for not wishing to accept the validity of a language which makes use of the senses, is that he will probably have a special weakness for kitsch, and so unconsciously abandon himself to sensual pleasure.

In the enjoyment of kitsch there is concealed yet another form of poison which touches on the very nerve of human dignity, namely, its lack of shame. Whenever anything intimate takes place, not only in matters of sex, whether it concerns the body or the soul, the question of modesty or shame arises. When we realize the all-penetrating function of shame in human life, the shamelessness of kitsch becomes apparent. It is most evident when we let ourselves go and give ourselves away in our reaction to a kitsch hymn or representation. Someone who sings a hymn in a sentimental way is not ashamed of showing
What is Kitsch?

how much he enjoys the pleasure of cheap raptures and “tender” melancholy. It is disgraceful to abandon oneself to such enjoyment, and shaming to do it in public.

This becomes even more serious when something of high intrinsic value is misused; when, for instance, what should be a hymn of homage to God is used as a pretext for pleasure or quick educational results—when a priest says, “I do not care whether the hymn is good art or worthless, so long as it stirs people in the way I want.” In such a case philistine obtuseness sacrifices true religious experience by seeking a utilitarian short-cut; the intimate personal relationship between God and the soul (which belongs to God alone) should only be realized in the presence of others in the reverence and seriousness of liturgical action: instead it is paraded in public. Humanly speaking, we ought to be ashamed not only before God, but for God, if for the sake of pleasure or of a quick pastoral success we use kitsch to express or exploit a religious experience. Is God in this way to be stripped of his majesty before man? Can we speak of the fear of God or of the love of God when all that we mean is pleasure or success? A person who sacrifices God’s majesty in religious kitsch does so hypocritically, in the name of reverence and charity; he is more shameless than the executioners on Calvary, for when they tore our Lord’s clothes from his body, they did so at least in the name of retributive justice. In this, as in other ways, it is also easy to fall into kitsch without being consciously aware of the lack of modesty involved.

Duplicity is perhaps the most striking of the ethical characteristics of kitsch, and lack of self-respect its most repulsive. But the most dangerous and the most deep rooted derives from sloth. Kitsch acts like an anaesthetic and is sought after for that reason; one can sink into cosy enjoyment reassured by the cliché, while capacity for personal life at a deeper level atrophies. Real appreciation of art is far removed from this lazy passivity; it demands a response from the whole personality, an affirmation from the heart.

Thus, in the experience of kitsch is concealed the capital sin of acedia, sloth, which makes us fretfully turn away from what leads to God, from the world of spiritual things, from the truly beautiful, good and holy, and in the last resort from supernatural grace, because all these things cost effort. They demand an impetus of the will, and a selfless opening of the mind to the real and the true. This refusal involves a stubborn resistance, if not an actual opposition, to the will of God, for a person who abandons himself to kitsch cannot respond with his whole heart to God’s love. He is rejecting the gracious but demanding claim made upon him through the beautiful, by that love. From the ethical standpoint, the most devastating thing that can be said of kitsch is that, at bottom, it is a rejection of God.

“Surely kitsch is not as bad as this?” Such might well be the first comment on these reflections. And it is true that in ordinary kitsch there is no actual or complete turning away from God, no mortal sin. Nevertheless, the fact that many devout Christians and some otherwise zealous clergy thoughtlessly treat it as a matter of indifference is disturbing. For it is precisely through small doses of poison that sloth works in the long run, breaking down moral resistance or at least the courage to build up a morally and religiously integrated personality. What has happened to the sluggish soul only becomes apparent when a serious moral crisis arises. Then the consequences of a diet of kitsch become apparent; they deserve a section to themselves.
What is Kitsch?

The Devastating Effects of Kitsch

For most people the realm of art lies on the periphery of their existence and interest. Should their approach to art be mistaken, it still does not seem important to their life as a whole. A capable and devout housewife who busies herself day in day out with her family can surely be forgiven if in one of her rare moments of leisure she reads a kitsch edifying book, or if she keeps holy pictures in her prayer book—which remind her perhaps of the dead, or of the first communion of one of her children. Is an office or manual worker who puts his whole heart into his work, not entitled at the end of the day to enjoy a sentimental film? Even if it is trash, surely, since it is not connected with his “real” life, there is no need to protest. Certainly we must respect the freedom of our fellow-men with charity, but we must also beware of seeing kitsch as a merely artistic deficiency, and art as a merely ornamental addition to life. We may answer that the morals and religion of these people are sound, and that the sentimental film may after all serve a good purpose. But in what way does it serve a good purpose? Alcohol promotes a feeling of well-being, it helps people to forget their worries and mistakes, it may make it easier for them to take decisions; but when the exhilaration passes off they have less strength and are more depressed than before. Because kitsch stupefies us it also deludes us as to its consequences.

The first of these is a slow, scarcely perceptible lowering of the whole level of religion and morality. If someone finds relaxation in kitsch, this is bound to begin to affect his whole life; secretly he begins to be content with the worthless and to take pleasure in it, he gives in to the untruthfulness of kitsch, and this will begin to be reflected in his behaviour; as kitsch forms of expression become acceptable, or at least familiar, at the periphery of his life, he will hardly be able to prevent them creeping also into his work, his preaching, teaching, the work of his hands. This must lower the quality of his output. And as we have seen, kitsch is a narcotic; as we become weaker we scarcely notice our decline. At the same time it gives the illusion of an experience of higher values, which, in a crisis, or as a motive for overcoming selfishness, will prove powerless.

The most disastrous effect of kitsch is necessarily on personal religious life. We have seen that kitsch tends to make use of higher values for its own ends. So long as these are within the hierarchy of creation there is no complete destruction of the values so misused; for all created things have the function of serving other values, even if they claim first of all to have a value in themselves. Even man himself may be made a means to an end, as long as his personal dignity is respected, as long as he is not merely serving as a means to an end.

But God, absolute and infinite, can never be used as a means to an end. If through kitsch we use God himself and our personal meeting with him to serve selfish ends, then we fail in our response to God. If we do this consciously and freely it involves grave moral fault. The true cult picture is a symbol through which the personal majesty and might of God is made present (as in the attitude to icons in the Eastern Church), but with religious kitsch there is no such experience of the divine presence. If we use the religious content of a picture as a means of personal satisfaction, we are overlooking the fact that in religion we confront, not a thing, but a person, one who speaks to us and demands our personal response. In kitsch, instead of meeting God we try to exploit him; our relationship is vitiated.
What is Kitsch?

In this description we have taken the effect of kitsch to its logical conclusion. Fortunately for most people this is much mitigated by some intention, in greater or less degree, to serve God and to seek his will. But is it really harmless that kitsch should be insinuating into our piety an attitude which of its nature excludes a religious meeting with God? Is it harmless if a “holy” picture is actually a false sign leading men, not to God, but to an idol, or to self-idolization? The enormous extent to which ordinary religious life has been affected in this way in the last hundred years presents a serious peril. Kitsch in word and picture has reduced God to a commodity for the purposes of spiritual pleasure; to what extent, for how many people, has this not prevented the experience of God’s heart-touching, personal love and loving personality?

We have now reached the crux of our enquiry, the examination of kitsch in practical Christian life.

Part Two

KITSCH IN CATHOLIC WORSHIP AND MORALITY
Kitsch in Catholic Worship and Morality

It cannot be said that all the Church's liturgy is by its very nature protected against kitsch. Liturgy is the expression of life and is therefore subject to the laws of life; it sprouts, grows, blooms, fructifies, becomes rich in autumn colours, and can fade in its individual manifestations. In the later periods of liturgical development, liturgical prayer and action gained a wider range; there was leisure to embroider (for instance, the sequences in the Roman missal) and a deliberate attempt was made to find beautiful forms in word, picture and ceremony. Thus there was more scope for play, for enjoyment, and so an opening for kitsch; but though there is a certain artificiality in some of the Breviary hymns, liturgical prayer is too objective, too much the prayer of the Church, the action is too concentrated, for there to be time for indulgence in the pleasure of pious self-admiration.

Kitsch has to make its way in by devious routes; for instance, when in some way the liturgical action is deflected from its proper purpose, perhaps by the accompanying music. The Viennese orchestral Masses of the classical period are for the most part of the highest artistic quality, as well as the expression of personal devotion, but from the religious point of view they are rather a sharing through musical contact of private piety than a suitable accompaniment to the common Sacrifice of the Christian people. Later imitators of these composers therefore found the path to sugary devotion and kitsch prepared for them.

In the liturgy itself, the Church's rubrics are a safeguard; she imposes strict rules for the sacramental mysteries and makes these binding in conscience. On the liturgical periphery, however, she leaves considerable freedom and it is here that the kitsch of a particular period is able to establish itself, both for private devotion and popular forms of piety. The Church generously allows scope in

1. A Saint.
   Carlo Dolci.
   p. 6. A technically good painting can come perilously near to kitsch.

2. A bunch of violets.
   Dürer.
   Albertina, Vienna.
   pp. 18, 22. A painting can be religious in feeling without having a religious subject.
The Infant Jesus with St John and two angels. Rubens. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

p. 39. A religious title to a painting does not necessarily make it a religious picture.

Jesus in the tabernacle. Modern German drawing, by a woman.

pp. 40, 44. Trying to evoke a religious response by an emotional and disingenuous appeal.

5. The Gift of the Fear of the Lord. ‘Holy’ card, printed in Italy.

p. 40. Theological truths represented as trivial and cosy.


pp. 40, 154. A dramatic viewpoint and lighting used as a trick to catch attention; realism used to make our Lord physically attractive.
8. The Rest on the Flight into Egypt. Painting by Philip Veit. p. 42. A sincere religious painting; but the placid and idyllic atmosphere is remote from reality, and therefore paves the way to kitsch.

9. Mary as the Good Shepherdess. 'Holy' card, German. p. 42. The bad qualities of Plate 8 without its redeeming sincerity and artistic talent; bogus in idea and feebly conventional in execution.
pp. 43-4. A famous painting which has inspired kitsch art and kitsch reactions through its idealization of childhood innocence.

offer You, dear Jesus,
everything I do this day.

p. 44. God became a child for us, but the artist has turned him into a cuddly doll; a trashy, sentimental formula.

pp. 46, 154. A drawing which purports to be our Lady, but the face and appeal are that of a film-star/pin-up girl.

13. The Penitent Magdalene.
p. 44. Aesthetically this may be a good picture, but the erotic treatment of a subject which purports to be pious makes it kitsch.
The Light of the World.
Painting by Holman Hunt. *Keble College, Oxford.*

A deeply religious painting by a great artist; but there is a hiatus between the symbolism of the conception and the realism of the representation.

15. Card of the Sacred Heart.

Three typical German 'holy'-cards

pp. 48, 110, 146. The face in Plate 15 is a sentimentalized and debased version of a generalized type derived from old masters, completely lacking in any spiritual truth or reality. The artist has been responding not to personal feeling but to commercial demand. 16 a, b and c are traditional pious kitsch.
Madonna and Child. Two medals. Widely available.

p. 62. A modern type of kitsch. The idea that it is 'modern' to be unrealistic has been used as an excuse for laziness. These are not simplifications of form but slurred drawing which is meaningless and slovenly.


p. 71. Showing the rococo tendency to secularize religious subjects, a type of art which is liable to be experienced as kitsch.


p. 97. The Bible gives us descriptions of supernatural beings of power and majesty, this sort of representation reduces them to the sweet and wishy-washy.
21. Elijah, from Bible illustrated by Tissot (1902).
   p. 108. Lay figures, badly drawn; the task he set himself seems to have been far beyond the compass of the artist's inspiration and even his technical gifts have failed him.

22. *Noli me tangere*, from Bible illustrated by Hole (1906).
   pp. 108, 119. Externals of dress and setting create a false verisimilitude which has deceived people into believing that the reality was like this; a comparison with Plate 24 demonstrates its banal emptiness.

23. *Noli me tangere*.
   Painting by Graham Sutherland, Chichester Cathedral.
   p. 109. A painting where the artist has been utterly involved in his subject and has put into each brush stroke the intensity of his own response.

   pp. 110, 152. Modern artists are using the direct approach of children's drawing as a means to circumvent the representational problems in religious art.

25. St Anthony.
   Statue made in Italy.
   pp. 97, 121, 152. A stereotyped idea of a sexless figure whose sanctity has been effortless.
5. Crucifixion.
Painting by Graham Sutherland. Church of St. Aidan, East Acton.
p. 134. A painting in which the artist has faced the subject as an encounter between God and ourselves as we are, in our world of indifference to him, of cruelty and disillusion.

Kitsch in the Church Today

both the visual arts and church music for the activities of lesser minds and artists, and so too with an indulgent smile—far too indulgent?—she tolerates the dominion of kitsch in the very house of God, in order not to deter even unenlightened piety so long as it is in some degree genuine. In the last resort this genial tolerance implies a deep respect for the personal freedom of the Christian. Certain limits are of course imposed, for the sake of theological truth, moral purity and dignity, but wide scope is still left for kitsch.

Images of the Saints

Let us take a few typical examples. Kitsch appears in the imitation wood-carved crucifix, which is really plaster, or that which is plastic “imitation ivory”, and in the imitation flowers, whether crudely coloured paper ones, or expensive and realistic wax or plastic.

Kitsch appears in the way in which stereotyped figures appear again and again. By all means let us have pictures and statues of our Lady of Lourdes, of the Little Flower, of St Anthony holding the Christ Child (Plate 25), the sad thing is that it is always the same type for each of these saints. It is not merely that this is cheap in the material sense, but that it is also kitsch in the sense that an easy way has been taken to avoid the effort and courage required to deal with anything unique.

Kitsch appears also in the sweetening and prettifying of sacred figures. Let us consider first the usual modern representation of an angel. In the biblical descriptions of angelic appearances, both in the New Testament and the Old, the impression given is of beings of more than earthly majesty and power. “His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the