

Rich in Kitsch



by Theodore Dalrymple

Hell, wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, is other people; in which case purgatory must be other people's taste. Every time I feel my misanthropy flagging, I go down to the local bric-a-brac warehouse, grandly called an antiques center, and remind myself of just how dreadful taste can be. It is not merely the absence of taste that appalls me, it is the positive espousal of all that is cheap, garish, and positively hideous.

Some of the bric-a-brac is so bad that it makes me laugh. The vast accumulation of kitsch, however, is not the result of spontaneous generation; kitsch is not self-generating but rather the product of industry (in the sense of hard work as well sometimes as of mass or automated production).

On my latest visit, I saw what might be called a masterpiece of kitsch. It was a multicolored, heavily glazed, and shiny teapot, not large enough to contain more than a single cup,

whose lid was a pig's head, predominantly pink, and whose vessel was a fat porcine body, predominantly blue, dressed in a cardigan with large buttons. Every detail had been designed, even skillfully designed, and the whole was well-made. Like a bureaucrat's directive with 29 bullet points, it was the product of much labor, conscientiously undertaken, perhaps by people who believed in the value of their work, perhaps by people who, unable to produce anything of artistic value but desirous to do so, decided in their bitterness and disappointment to parody the decorative arts and satirize the absence of aesthetic discrimination of their fellow creatures. If the latter, they took a leaf from Lenin's book: the worse the better.

It is not easy to define kitsch, though at its extreme—the teapot above, for example—it is easy to recognize. Definitions vary and rarely seem entirely satisfactory.

Kitsch: art, decorative objects, or design considered by many people to be ugly, without style, or false but enjoyed by other people, often because they are funny.

I presume that whoever wrote this definition means the decorative objects to be funny rather than the people who enjoy them, but one cannot be entirely certain, because it is all too easy to transfer one's deprecation from the objects themselves to the persons who enjoy them or even consider them beautiful.

Here is another definition, which captures something important about kitsch:

Kitsch: art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way.

Sentimentality is certainly often, though not always, a

feature of kitsch; the pig of the teapot lid was a smiling, friendly pig, and not a dirty pig that might be seen in a pigpen. But the author of the definition leaves entirely unaddressed the nature of the people who do the considering, or who appreciate kitsch with irony, no doubt because this would reveal him to be profoundly inegalitarian; for there is little doubt that, the lower down the social scale you go, the more kitsch is liked and thought beautiful, without a hint of irony. It is the upper classes, secure in the certainty of their own good taste, who look on kitsch with irony, and can afford to do so. True appreciation of kitsch is completely unironic; it is to aesthetic appreciation what a belief in Father Christmas is to an understanding of economics.

Naturally, taste varies, and what is kitsch to one person may be high art to another. For example, I think that, while one Pre-Raphaelite painting might just about be tolerable, provided it is not of one of those terrible red-haired Madonnas so favored by some of them, a whole roomful of Pre-Raphaelite paintings is kitsch.

However it may be defined, kitsch seems to be a comparatively modern phenomenon, a phenomenon of mass society. Peasants and aristocrats did not generally go in for kitsch. One of the things I noticed in Africa when I traveled through it was that those still living in rural areas in a comparatively traditional way had instinctive good taste, both as to the form and coloration of their huts or houses. They may have had few and simple possessions, and those few may have been fashioned by themselves, but they were generally elegant in form.

Of course, the peasants in rural Africa had very little disposable income with which to buy kitschy objects, but the fact remains that they could have constructed their huts in as ill-designed a way as any building by Frank Gehry, and that they did not. Not only were their houses or huts pleasing to look at, but their villages also. From the aesthetic point of

view, they were vastly, incomparably the superior of any contemporary starchitect.

As soon as the peasants moved to the city, however, where life was more exciting and in some ways easier for them, they seemed immediately to lose their sense of form and color. Kitsch became the cynosure of their eyes. And it is not only in Africa that I have noticed this strange effect.

I have often desired to start a museum of kitsch, perhaps even a national museum of kitsch. It would not be difficult, or even expensive, to fill it adequately, nor, alas, would it take very long to do so. The difficult part for me would be to afford the premises and the upkeep.

My first exhibit, long cherished, would be a shocking pink plastic alarm clock in the form of a mosque with trimmings in gold, which recites suras from the Koran to wake people up. It cost \$3 in Istanbul, and I chose the pink rather than the baby blue or apple green version because I thought it was the most awful, though perhaps I should have bought all three for the sake of my future, never to be realized, museum. While I was there, however, I did buy a triple portrait of Kemal Ataturk of the kind whose face and eyes turn as you move in relation to it.

My museum would have departments of religious kitsch, political kitsch, sporting and entertainment kitsch, as well as purely decorative and domestic kitsch. It would have a very serious purpose: to alert people to the horrors of their own bad taste. Since all judgment is comparative, there would have to be sewn among the exhibits items of the best taste, preferably of no great value, to obviate the argument that the exercise of good taste requires money. It requires good taste.

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