

Aesthetically Bad, Emotionally Charged and Enormously Popular

**By Kevin Dykstra
Student ID# 4566505**

April 5, 2002

**Tutorial K
Tutorial Instructor: Yvette Poorter**

Aesthetically Bad, Emotionally Charged and Enormously Popular

Kitsch. One of those terms, like so many others, that gets thrown around as if we all know what it means. But do we? When you press people on the point you catch them either without an answer or with an unsatisfactory one. Most people use adjectives like cheap, sentimental, overly familiar, sweet, trite, and ordinary. Or others will say the bawdy, gaudy, shoddy mass-art that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste. But what does this all mean? Why in the past have art critics been so critical of kitsch with some going so far as to calling it anti-art? Why is it so popular if kitsch is aesthetically bad? I propose in this paper that kitsch is popular because it's capable of producing personal valuable experiences. Most people enjoy feeling happy and joyful. Most of us probably have a familiar place where we like to go to gather our thoughts and feel good about who we are. Many of us have probably smelt the aroma of something and find ourselves drifting away to a comfort zone where no one can bring us down or break that tranquil moment. For those of us who have had favourite pet we remember them and the joy they brought into our lives. These special moments among many others are typical of personal valuable experiences that kitsch is capable of producing. In using the term kitsch we understand that kitsch comes in many forms from kitsch objects to kitsch literature but this paper will focus primarily on kitsch paintings and its ability to produce these experiences. This is not to say of course that non-kitsch works of art do not also produce valuable experiences or that some forms of kitsch produce different experiences. We will see by illustration of a few examples from the Bourgeois Realists, Norman Rockwell, Andy Warhol and Margaret Keane, that kitsch is an artistic style. It is a style that celebrates the familiar in our daily lives, a style that produces this personal valuable experience for the viewing audience or the buyer of kitsch. We will also see that these experiences are initially personal but because of the universal and popular appeal of kitsch, there is also a sense that we are experiencing similar if not the same feelings that others feel in the same situation. This creates a sense of belonging to a larger sentient group and this affirmation feels good.

According to Matei Calinescu, “it (kitsch) came into use in the 1860’s and 1870’s in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was later employed to designate cheap artistic stuff”.¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century “kitsch” became by and large an international expression as other European languages adopted it. Currently, there is no consensus among the scholars as to the etymology of “kitsch”. Some believe it derives from the English “sketch” mispronounced by the Germans, while others link it to the German verb *verkitschen* which means “to make cheap”. Others still, maintain that the origins of “kitsch” can be traced to the German verb *kitschen*, meaning *den Strassenschlam zusammenscharren*, or literally, “to collect rubbish off the street”. And finally, there are even some that speculate that “kitsch” comes from the inversion of the French word “*chic*”. The one thing that the experts do agree is that until recently the use of the word “kitsch” in reference to a work of art has carried a certain negative connotation and implied an aesthetic inadequacy.

If kitsch is a relatively recent phenomenon, where did it come from and what brought about this change in works of art that they would somehow be considered aesthetically inadequate? It was in the late nineteenth century that sociologists and historians of modern society theorized that it was industrialization, the fall of the old aristocracy and the rapid rise of the middle class that presented a threat to the political and moral structure for all time. Kitsch was seen as the by-product of this social change. Kitsch appealed to the lowbrow tastes of the Munich bourgeoisie who like most nouveaux riches thought that they could achieve the status of the fallen cultural elite by imitating their cultural habits. Works of art were thus seen as a way of showing this new social status. It was Clement Greenberg who in his 1931 treatise, *Avant-garde and Kitsch*, voiced his distaste for kitsch, making it clear the impact it would have on art and future culture. Greenberg states:

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-garde. True enough – simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that this to which the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch . . . Kitsch is mechanical and operates on formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.²

¹ Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 234.

² *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 10.

Since the early twentieth century Kitsch has been seen as art with all to well rehearsed formulas and its obvious use of triggered emotional responses, most notably sentimental feelings. It is these sentimental feelings, or stock emotions, that were viewed by critics as unnecessary and something to be avoided at all costs if society was to somehow advance. In more recent times as the industrialized revolution was followed by further growth of mass culture, it is the media and communication revolution of the last 20 years that has created for the first time a global mass culture. This new global culture has seen an even larger rise of the middle and working classes at the expense of the elitist class. As a result high and low culture are now understood to have more in common than once realized. For example, sociologists and art theorists, now believe that the interest and attitude of consumers of so-called kitsch may be even more aesthetic than that of a typical consumer of high art. Unlike art lovers, who buy their art from respected dealers, consumers of kitsch are more interested in the art itself and the feelings it evokes than in the reputation of the artist or the social status that they may gain in purchasing this art. The popular consumer buys the art because they like them and are not necessarily interested in whether or not they have made a good investment or not. So if popular consumers buy art because they like them, the works of art must be capable of producing a personal valuable experience of some kind. And if this is the case, is it really logical to declare kitsch works of art as aesthetically bad?

Kitsch from its very first use in language first by art critics and then by art lovers has implied esthetical deficiencies. The term “kitsch” has its established use denoting objects that have mass appeal yet they are judged distasteful, tacky, overly sentimental and cheap by the art-educated elite. Interestingly enough, in all of the material that I have researched all the authors in some form or another considered kitsch to be aesthetically bad, but none of them actually explains what the badness consisted of. Tomas Kulka in his book *Kitsch and Art* states “in view of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the visual arts in the last fifty years, its seems very risky to claim that kitsch can be characterized by some set of structural properties; that one can show what its aesthetics deficiencies are, and what sets it apart from respectable art.”³ That being said, Kulka did attempt to do that very thing and outlines three necessary and sufficient conditions for a Kitsch work of art.

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.

³ *Kitsch and Art*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), 4

3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.⁴

Then using traditional evaluation methods of unity, complexity and intensity he tried to explain the aesthetic inadequacies of kitsch. While Kulka feels he succeeded in this endeavor I found his arguments not convincing. Even using his conditions above which restricts kitsch to a small population of what most of us would consider kitsch today, there are examples of kitsch art that satisfy his evaluations based on unity, complexity and intensity, and on the flip side highly acclaimed pieces of art that do not. Examples of art from many artists, including the artists presented in this paper satisfy his requirements. Examining kitsch using many other evaluation theories to find proof of esthetic deficiencies was also not fruitful. George Dickie's evaluation theory called Instrumentalism, however, that is presented in his book *Introduction to Aesthetics – An Analytical Approach* does provide us with a clue as to the possible reason for kitsch popularity. Dickie writes “Beardsley and Goodman are right that the only reasonable basis for the evaluation of arts is its capacity to produce valuable experiences. Why else would human beings have invented the institution of art if not to create objects (instruments) with the capacity to produce experiences that they regard as valuable.”⁵

It is this experience that consumers of kitsch receive that gives it its value and popularity. People are attracted to kitsch because they like its subject matter. Kitsch relates art to the lives of people. The over-sentimentality of kitsch is not that at all. They are real and sincere emotions that the consumers of kitsch feel. Emotions are something everyone is capable of experiencing, making it universal and hence its mass popularity. Kitsch is a style that celebrates the repetition of the past and the joy of every day life. Kitsch is like the old saying when life is moving too fast, that we have to “stop to smell the flowers”. It uncovers the symbolic richness of all that exists. Kitsch sees that all culture, whether high or low, is creative, as we are all creative. Kitsch celebrates sentiment and banality. Kitsch rejoices in the familiar and in all things that provide a sense of grounding. Kitsch is a sense of comfort in the same sense that a favourite blanket or a favourite food is comforting. Kitsch is not “bad” taste, it's a taste for what is core to our human existence. Our modern (or post-modern) society confronts all of us with many choices and challenges. Life is fast. Life is hard. Life can feel so complex. In reality life is simple. It's about

⁴ *Kitsch and Art*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), 37

⁵ *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 157.

enjoying those simple things in life. Kitsch reminds of that, day in, day out. As Sam Bickley writes in his paper

Kitsch as a Repetitive System: a Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy:

Kitsch aims to re-embed its consumers on the 'deepest' personal level. Precisely by deflecting the creative, the innovative and the uncertain, kitsch advances the repetitive, the secure and the comfortable, supplying the reassurance that what is to come will resemble what has gone before, that the hazards of innovation and uncertainty are far away, and that one is safe and secure in the routines of an unadventurous genre. ... kitsch turns its failures into cute: cutely conventional, quaintly repetitive. It's dishonesty, its derivation and its apparent failure to be original are transformed into a charming gesture of sincerity and a self-conscious effort to affect the sincere appeal of naiveté. .. the failure of the kitsch artifact to realize the aesthetic objectives of high art brings the taster of kitsch closer to his own fundamental human quality, not the existential quality of disembodied man, but the all-too-human quality of folly itself, which, humanly, makes no bones about mistaking an imitation for an original.⁶

Having reviewed the origin of kitsch, discussed a little of its aesthetics and why it is considered so popular, the remainder of the paper will focus on some examples of Kitsch art. I have chosen the following four examples because I believe that they are not only examples of art that was popular at the time they were created but they also show how kitsch has changed over the past 100 years. All of the art and or these artists have been criticized as producing kitsch art or art that appeals to popular tastes. My first example comes from Bourgeois Realist time period. At the time when the term Kitsch was first being used at the turn of the last century, there was a type or realistic paintings that had its roots from the romantics period of art. The subjects painted by the so-called pompier painters represented the daily life of the rapidly raising middle-class. These paintings “of” the bourgeois social class were painted “for” the bourgeois and it is therefore not difficult to understand why it was so highly appreciated by the people of the time. The art critics of the early twentieth century called this art “art pompier”, eclecticism, academic painting and even kitsch sending this genre of art into almost total oblivion, and unfortunately continues to be mentioned in art history only unfavorably.

The Bourgeois Realists approach to the subjects and their use of tried and true painting techniques were in perfect harmony with their intentions. They depicted the every day scenes of the bourgeois life style that for them represented a trueness to life. These paintings depicted all aspects of their life, their habits and modes of existence. They rejoiced in the rise of their class and mirrored all of their struggles. They tried to reflect a specific way of life in a flattering way. This was the beginning of the modern age and the paintings of this time period reflected the

⁶ *Kitsch as a Repetitive System.* <http://www.thing.net/~sbinkley/Kitsch.html>

enthusiasm for progress that called for liberty and equality for all men but at the same time encouraged

individualism and egotism that directly

conflicted with these noble aims. Social and

family life was perhaps the favorite territory

of Bourgeois Realist paintings. There was

nothing of public or private life that they did

not delight in putting on canvas. One such

example is John Henry Bacon's 1892 painting,

A Wedding Morning. (Figure 1). As Aleksa

Celebonovic states in his book, *Some Call It*

Kitsch – masterpieces of the bourgeois realism:

Bacon observes certain features that perfectly reflect the aspirations of the middle classes.

The impeccable dress of the bride, which is being given its final touches, contrasts the unpretentiousness of the setting. The bride's friends, whose attitude betrays stunned admiration, certainly also belonged to a modest social class, if one may judge from their dress and bearing. Everything seems to indicate that this marriage is equivalent to a social promotion, or at least that the family is determined to give this impression.⁷



Figure 1. John Henry Bacon, *A Wedding Morning*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 46" x 64", The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.

This painting is presented in a very realistic style. It depicts a subject that is instantly recognizable and familiar with the viewing audience. A wedding is the celebration of the union of two people. This wedding morning is a scene of joy, a scene of happiness. All the details are there to pull us into the moment. The older women attend to the details of the dress on the soon to be bride. Her friends stand in the doorway holding back tears of joy. The young girl on the chair in front looks on in awe of the beauty of the bride. The union of two people who love each other evokes a personal valuable experience. We all feel moved at the same time, for the same reasons and it feels good to have this feeling.

My next example is probably one of America's most loved painters, Norman Rockwell. Norman Rockwell was born in New York in 1894 and is most famous for his Saturday Evening Post Covers that spanned a period of 30 years depicting every aspect of the American life style. Although for the most part his paintings depicted the trials

⁷ *Some Call It Kitsch: masterpieces of bourgeois realism*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 128.

and tribulations of childhood and adolescence many also reflected morals and values of his time and a youthful wish of how things ought to be. Rockwell, through his paintings tried to bring the everyday ordinary activities to a higher level of cultural importance. Although considered kitsch by several art critics Rockwell remained true to his depiction of our most enduring of human qualities. Undoubtedly Rockwell's most famous series of paintings was the series of four paintings called *The Four Freedoms* painted in 1943 in the middle of World War II. The four freedoms were freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from fear and freedom from want. In the painting *Freedom from Want*, (Figure 2) Rockwell paints a family meal that is about to start; perhaps it is Thanksgiving. The grandmother is caught placing the turkey on the table while the grandfather waits patiently behind her to carve it. The other family members are sitting around the table, talking excitedly among themselves. The whole family scene



is beautifully articulated and composed. Again, the style is very realistic. The details of every individual have been taken into careful consideration. It reminds us of a photograph that most of us at some point have probably taken of family and/or friends at a social gathering. As difficult as it seems we try to press ourselves back against the wall to get as many people into the picture as possible. Even the little girl to the right of her grandfather and the gentleman in the front right hand corner appear to be looking at us as if to say, "hey, don't forget about us".

Figure 2. Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*, 1943. Oil on canvas, Collection Norman Rockwell

Again, the scene is repetitive and familiar to most of us in North American culture. The scene evokes our senses of comfort foods and happy times in a family setting. It feels good to remember. It produces a feeling of comfort and there is perhaps an urge to pick up the phone to call home just to say hi, something that feels good when we do it and something we should do more often. Paintings, such as

Norman Rockwell's paintings evoke these experiences. As Ronald Reagan wrote in the foreword to a book of Rockwell's paintings, *Norman Rockwell's Patriotic Times*:

The pictures focus not on the rich or mighty, but on everyday Americans and the pleasures of home, outdoors, and family that all of us can enjoy. Our Nation has changed profoundly since the days of the America that Norman Rockwell so skillfully portrayed. Yet the values that he cherished and celebrated - love of God and country, hard work, neighborhood, and family - still give us strength, and will shape our dreams for the decades to come.⁸

It is important to mention at this point the significance of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol who had a profound impact on the perception of art in the twentieth century and therefore help explain the more recent acceptance of kitsch as a possible style of art. Works of art like Duchamp's ordinary commercial products such as his store-bought bottle rack and a urinal which he called ready-mades were an attempt to break down existing aesthetics forms. Likewise artists like Andy Warhol and the Pop Art movement utilized the imagery and techniques of consumerism and popular culture to break down the barriers between art and life. Pop Art favoured figural imagery (normally celebrities), the reproduction and repetition of common every day objects, such as Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans (Figure 3), comic strips and advertisements. Warhol's signature style using commercial silk-screening techniques was used to create identical, mass produced images on canvas. This movement of the 1950's and 60's essentially eliminated the distinction of "good" and "bad" taste and the difference between fine art and commercial art techniques. Although not intended to evoke similar sentimental emotions as the kitsch I have presented in this paper, Pop Art still relied on repetition, familiarity, comfort, and simplicity that was reflected in the realities of everyday life of ordinary people. And it is the breakthrough of the Pop Art movement that has helped recognize and perhaps authenticate the experience of kitsch in our lives.



Figure 3. Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Can*, 1962. Silkscreen print.

⁸ *Norman Rockwell's Patriotic Times*, ed. George Mendoza. (New York: Viking), Foreword.

My final example of a kitsch artist is Pop icon from the 1970's, American artist Margaret Keane, who continues to produce her trademark paintings of wide-eyed children and animals. Her paintings that were once considered kitsch and something that only the mass popular culture would buy has recently been rediscovered by a new generation and has become increasingly collectible. Keane's paintings of little girls are easily recognizable by the large eyes (Figure 4) that express happiness, sadness, loneliness and other sentimental feelings. Keane reduces the



Figure 4. Margaret Keane, *Untitled*, 1999. Oil on canvas, Keane Eyes Gallery.

many complexities of our human experience into a simple sentiment giving a sense to our daily life and wonderment in all things wholesome and simple. In this painting by Keane of a little girl we are drawn in by her beautiful big eyes. In each one of us her expression may evoke different emotions but every case, the emotion is a familiar one, one that we can identify with. We are curious about what she is thinking about and if she is sad or lonely we may get a feeling to hug her, to comfort her, to let her know that we will be there for her. Her sadness may move us all universally and we celebrate this shared feeling. As Milan Kundera states in his novel

The Unbearable Lightness of Being: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: how nice to be moved,

together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch".⁹ It is the universality of emotions depicted in so called kitsch paintings that make them so popular. It is the familiar feelings that we sense all living beings feel that makes us feel connected with everyone else. Keane's paintings, as do other kitsch paintings, provides us with the opportunity through her eyes to see and experience rather than just looking-at the world around us. It's an opportunity to stop taking our core emotions for granted, rejoicing in all aspects of life and saying yes to its existence. We feel we are alive. We feel present in the moment. We feel, along with everyone else, this emotion and it feels good.

⁹ Milan Kundera: *from Kitsch to the meaning of life*.

http://n.ethz.ch/student/danou/daniel/readings/kundera_e.html#kitsch_a

This paper has looked at both the evolution of kitsch from the Bourgeois Realists from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century through to the last decade with works from Margaret Keane. We have seen how the early works incorporated Romantic painting techniques focusing on the rising middle class and their enthusiasm for everything in their daily lives. Norman Rockwell's paintings showed us in plain view our endearing human qualities in simple every day life examples. Every Saturday Evening Post cover evoked memories and feelings of how great life is if we take the time savour it. And Margaret Keane's paintings help us open up to that inner child in all of us and to feelings that we can all relate to. We have examined through these examples the popularity and the value of the personal experiences these kitsch works of art are capable of producing. Kitsch is a celebration of the familiar, an artistic style that reaches out to us all. Kitsch invites us to affirm our existence. Kitsch gives us comfort when everything around us does not. Who does not want to have those warm "fuzzies" when they see a cuddly kitten or an old couple holding hands as they promenade through the park? Who does not get a lump in their throat when we see the tears of joy on a mother's face when her child returns home for the first time? Kitsch rejoices in these feelings. Its sentiments are universal sentiments, sentiments that could include everyone if only we would let it. It is what it is. And it feels good.

Bibliography

- AskArt.com. *AskArt – Biography for the Artist Warhol, Andy*. <http://www.askart.com/Biography.asp>
- Attinger, Daniel. *Milan Kundera: from Kitsch to the meaning of life*.
http://n.ethz.ch/student/danou/daniel/readings/kundera_e.html#kitsch_a
- Berger, Karol. *A Theory of Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Brown, Curtis F.. *Star Spangled Kitsch*. New York: Universal Books, 1975.
- Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.
- Celebonovic, Aleksa. *Some Call It Kitsch: masterpieces of bourgeois realism*. New York: Abrams, 1974.
- Dickie, George. *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Dickie, George. *The Century of Taste*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Everett, Sally, ed. *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist Avant-garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991.
- Frank, Frederick. *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation is action*. United States: Batam Books, 1993.
- Gowans, Alan. *Learning to See: Historical Perspective on Modern/Commercial Arts*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981.
- Greenberg, Clement. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Isenberg, Arnold. *Aesthetic and the Theory of Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973.
- Kulka, Tomas. *Kitsch and Art*. University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1996.
- Keane Eyes Gallery. *Keane Eyes Gallery Temp* . <http://www.keane-eyes.com/>
- London Art Gallery, *Kanadian Kitsch from Kaost to Koast*. London: London Art Gallery, 1975.
- Mann, Paul. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Mendoza, George. *Norman Rockwell's Patriotic Times*. New York: Viking, 1982.
- Murphy, Richard. *Theorizing the Avant-garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Olson, Ivan. *The Arts and Critical Thinking in American Education*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 2000.
- Ross, Stephen David, ed. *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Thing.net. *Kitsch as a Repetitive System*. <http://www.thing.net/~sbinkley/Kitsch.html>
- Urbanities. *Kitsch and the Modern Predicament by Roger Scruton*, http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_1_urbanities_kitsch_and_the.html , 1992