

From Drop-Shipped to the Divine: Devotional Kitsch, Gamer Saints, and Popular Catholic Iconography

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Abstract

Devotional objects for Catholic saints often conjure a specific visual language in the minds of believers, from small medallions depicting meditative portraits to softly glowing oil paintings adorning the fronts of prayer cards. Despite the Catholic Church's prominent role in the Western art historical canon, for everyday Catholics, its visual legacy is as much the kitschy tropes of saint cards and candles - the objects of everyday devotion - as it is the grandeur of the Sistine Chapel. The popularity of these objects speaks to the fact that this visual language of devotional kitsch serves a powerful function in the daily lives of believers and facilitates genuine religious experiences. This paper takes a look at the devotional art objects depicting the so-called "millennial gamer saint," Carlo Acutis, as a case study for how kitsch is utilized in digital spaces, specifically commerce sites like Etsy, in real time to create visual narratives that resonate with believers in the 21st century. It considers the kitschiness of these art objects not as an artistic

blemish in the lofty art history of the Church, but as an essential element of saintly devotion, mediated through products and consumption.

Keywords: iconography, kitsch, Catholic art, visual culture, Carlo Acutis

Introduction

Devotional objects for Catholic saints often conjure a specific visual language in the minds of believers, from small medallions depicting meditative portraits to softly glowing oil paintings adorning the fronts of prayer cards. Despite the Catholic Church's prominent role in the Western art historical canon, from the grandiose Sistine Chapel ceiling to the Baroque drama of the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, for everyday Catholics, its visual legacy is much more personal, and often, kitschier than the annals of visual history. The popularity of these objects, from laminated saint cards to plastic rosaries and ceramic statues of Mary, speaks to the fact that this visual language of devotional kitsch serves a powerful function in the daily lives of believers. This tension in Catholic visual culture between art history and popular devotion has reached a new inflection point with the recent canonization of the so-called "millennial gamer saint" Carlo Acutis.

Acutis, who died in 2006, is the first millennial to be canonized and his holy works during his life included creating a website to catalogue Eucharistic miracles, earning him the nickname "God's influencer" (Sherlock, 2025). While Acutis' canonization is notable for several reasons, from a visual perspective, his image and persona represent an aesthetic challenge to traditional depictions of sainthood. For instance, rather than flowing robes, Acutis is most often

depicted with his signature red popped-collar polo shirt – a temporal, visual tether to the 21st century; even his official tomb incorporates design elements found in gaming chairs (Figure 1). Additionally, as the first saint to come of age during the advent of the internet, it is unsurprising the internet has in turn started to dictate the iconography of Acutis. A simple search for Carlo Acutis on Etsy.com reveals a plethora of image tropes from Shepard Fairey’s infamous Barack Obama Hope poster to pixelated video game sprite pins depicting his likeness. Looking at readily-accessible devotional objects for Acutis on e-commerce sites like Etsy serves as a bellwether for the role kitsch plays in the creation of holy imagery in contemporary society as internet users assert their own iconographic desires, circumventing the Church and substituting Acutis Pokémon cards for traditional prayer cards. This iconographic phenomenon, facilitated by the uniquely participatory nature of the internet, suggests that kitsch has transcended poor artistic taste to become representative of popular appeal and cultural engagement in the digital age. In addition to this evolution of kitsch, these devotional objects represent a broader, more radical shift in power dynamics of religious iconography that reverses the conventional top-down hierarchy of visual language that characterizes Catholic art history.

Figure 1

A nun praying at the tomb of Carlo Acutis



Note. From *A nun praying at the tomb of Carlo Acutis* by C. Furlong, People.com

(<https://people.com/gods-influencer-carlo-acutis-becomes-first-millennial-saint-20-years-later-11805002/>.) Copyright 2025 C. Furlong/Getty

Biographical & Art Historical Background

Who is Carlo Acutis?

Carlo Acutis was an English-born Italian teenager who passed away shortly after receiving a leukemia diagnosis at the age of 15. During his lifetime, he was a devout Catholic – the strength of his convictions and faith brought his mother, who was raised in a secular family, back into the folds of the Church (Sherlock, 2025). His coding of a website to catalogue and promote Eucharistic miracles during his lifetime is an oft-cited example of his saintly character,

as well as his nearly-daily attendance at mass (Sherlock, 2025). Carlos was beatified, the first step in becoming an official saint, in 2020 and officially canonized in September of 2025.

As a saint, his sainthood has been shaped by the internet. His tomb is livestreamed 24/7 and believers leave comments on prayer videos on YouTube invoking his intercession and thanking him for miracles (Sherlock, 2025). The distinctly contemporary, digital nature of his sainthood is not an accident: he was canonized in an extremely accelerated fashion. Not only did his mother, who is in the rare position to see her son become a saint during her lifetime, spearhead his canonization campaign with media tours and a memoir about Acutis' life, but the Church has publically acknowledged that Acutis' canonization reflects the needs of the Church to reach younger generations in this moment of time (Sherlock, 2025) – a supposed convergence between holy forces, a mother's love, and institutional directives.

Divine intercession or not, the canonization of Acutis has been a boon for the church. Acutis' saintly relics have toured the globe, and at any stop tens of thousands of parishioners arrive for a chance to see his remains. The demand for these remains have soared to such a height that the Catholic Church has had to ask police to crack down on vendors purportedly selling locks of Acutis' hair (Sherlock, 2025). Over half a million-people visited his tomb in the first eight months of 2025, and that was before his official canonization (Mares, 2025). Issues and questions of faith aside, the “millennial gamer” saint has proved to be incredibly popular and his devotion has spread from traditional pilgrimages to the comments section of YouTube, setting forth a new paradigm for digital worship.

Catholicism: A Religion of Objects and Art

Catholicism, for much of its history, has centered worship and devotional practices around images and objects, especially when compared to Protestant denominations, which accounts for the unique situation that Carlo Acutis' iconography occupies. Much as it was necessary to outline who Acutis is, it is also worth taking a brief historical overview of the use of images and art in a Catholic context to better understand how the Acutis phenomenon is, at its heart, a distinctly Catholic, rather than generally Christian, occurrence.

At a high level, it is often said that Catholics prioritize the Image over the Word. Protestants on the other hand emphasize salvation through the Word, and Image becomes either subservient to the Word or, in more extreme cases, diminishes the power of the Word. The relationship between art and written religion has been a long-standing debate in the history of Christianity, dating back to the deliberation over icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 8th century C.E. (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, pp. 3-4). At the risk of being reductive, there are generally two sides to this debate: iconophiles, who see art as a boon to worshippers, and iconoclasts, who see art as idolatrous. For iconophiles, icons and religious art are critical because they facilitate religious experiences for often illiterate audiences and can collapse the spatial and spiritual distance between worshipper and the subject of worship (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, pp. 3-4). Some iconophiles go so far as to argue that the process of making an icon is an inherently holy act in that mirrors Christ's incarnation: taking a holy subject and rendering it into a material, tangible form (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, pp. 3-4). For iconoclasts, the fear is that rather than functioning as

a tool for worship, the icon or art object would become the holy subject itself, thus leading believers to worship a false idol.

This debate became more heated during the Renaissance and subsequent Baroque era as the Catholic Church increased its spending on grand art commissions while facing growing criticism of its financial and doctrinal operations. For the Church in the Renaissance era, the artist had moved beyond a mere craftsman to being in a “co-creative relationship with God,” (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, p. 6) and the flourishing of artistic output that the Church facilitated spread into the private realm as well. The Church’s belief was that the proliferation of images served a functional, educational purpose as well, calling to mind key doctrine and histories in the minds of the believers who looked upon these art objects (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, 6).

Throughout the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, the Church continued to invest heavily in the arts for both their parishioners and to preserve their own image and soft power throughout the continent. This ongoing backing of visual art and devotional objects throughout its history has led to these objects becoming synonymous with Catholic worship itself. Indeed, art and devotional objects have a long and varied history within the Catholic Church, from the use of private devotional statues in the Middle Ages¹ to archeological evidence of personal devotional objects carried by American Catholics in the early years of the country.² One could argue that this emphasis on art and objects is a continuous thread from the early

¹ For more information, consult: Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters (2001).

² For more information, consult Masur (2020).

Christian Church going back to commemorative pilgrimage flasks from shrines that date back to the 4th century CE (Figure 2).

This positive Catholic attitude towards religious art becomes especially salient when compared to Protestant approaches. In the early stages of the Reformation, Protestants took a range of stances regarding religious images. Martin Luther, the catalyst for the Reformation, took a cautious approach to images, acknowledging their potential educational uses but continuing to emphasize salvation through faith alone – a position that was aided through the advent of the printing press and the easy reproduction of the Bible. John Calvin advanced this idea further, objecting to the educational use of images entirely, arguing that if the Church had been preaching the Word properly that images would not be needed (Dawtry & Irvine, 2002, p. 7). Perhaps the strongest iconoclastic Protestant approach was taken by Oliver Cromwell during the English Reformation when he and his followers violently destroyed religious paintings and other art objects in churches believing them to be wholly idolatrous. While most Protestants today would perhaps reject the outright vicious iconoclasm of that era, the effect remains that Protestantism, as a whole, has less of a continuous history of embracing religious art and artifacts compared to Catholicism, and Protestant attitudes towards these images is more varied and ambivalent than their Catholic counterparts due to the denominational splintering of the religion. Putting aside the obvious caveat that Acutis is a Catholic saint, this history demonstrates that concerns over holy iconography would exist in a largely Catholic context. Thus, the following discussion about the image crafting of Acutis is best understood within Catholic contexts, both art historical and media-based.

Figure 2

Pilgrim Flask with Saint Menas



Note. From *Pilgrim Flask with Saint Menas*, by unknown artist, 4th-7th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/442902>)

The Visual Language of Carlo Acutis

Crafting Saintly Iconography

While it is estimated that there are several thousand Catholic saints, generally speaking, there is a specific visual archetype invoked by the term “saint”: flowing robes, a serene expression, a halo, and an identifying symbol of some kind, such as Saint Lucy’s eyeballs or Saint Catherine’s wheel. This imagery has a non-specific historical quality to it, evoking times

long past without any specific temporal markers. This iconography, while now normative, is also the result of conscious image crafting by the Church – saints are inherently image constructs as much as they are educational exemplars. This is not to dismiss religious belief in the validity of saints or their existence, but rather to acknowledge that their stories and images are very much conscious decisions made by biographers and artists under the guidance of the Church to fulfill a certain function. For ancient saints, whose stories were passed down orally before being transcribed, this construction is even more apparent. The fact that saints' hagiographies and icons are created posthumously, sometimes several decades after their passing, is perhaps the clearest indication of this. For instance, Benedicta Ward in her book *Harlots of the Desert* (1987) illustrates that the stories of female ascetic saints such as Saint Pelagia are ultimately stories that are told by members of a monastic order for that monastic order (p. 16). In other words, hagiographies like Pelagia's are concerned less with being a historically accurate biographical account and are rather narratives constructed by monks in order to remind them of their inherently sinful state and to repent (Ward, 1987, p. 16). However, not every instance of institutional intervention has a self-serving purpose. Decisions such as what symbol a saint will be identified by have a practical purpose in helping parishioners, many of whom were illiterate for the majority of the Church's history, identify specific saints in altarpieces and church decorations.

It is against the weight of this historical and institutional precedent that the iconographic shift created by Acutis and his digital devotees becomes even more significant. Certainly, as previously mentioned, the Church has a vested interest in highlighting Acutis' millennial

features, such as his use of the internet, to attract a new generation of believers. Additionally, Acutis' mother, Antonia Salzano, has been actively shaping her son's image and memory in financially backing his sainthood campaign and conducting a media tour in support of his canonization. She has even spoken out against stories that portray Acutis as less-than-devout to protect her son's memory (Sherlock, 2025), or, in a more cynical view, to protect the narrative she has created for her son's canonization. Acutis' saintly narrative and image is steeped in the internet from the website he created in his lifetime to the Catholic Church livestreaming his tomb, even to Antonia speaking to digital news outlets to promote her son, and it is that same element that now presents a novel, complicating element in the construction of millennial sainthood.

At a visual level, the aesthetics of the millennial era and the internet represent a sharp break from the normative saintly depictions outlined above. Firstly, they are inherently temporally referential: Acutis' red polo shirt and futuristic tomb can only exist at this particular moment in time as compared to the timelessness of a statue of Saint Joseph, per se. For an institution that is concerned with historical continuity, this is a notable deviation. Secondly, Acutis is one of very few laypeople who have been canonized. While the exact number of official saints is unknown, the vast majority of them belonged to religious orders, and those vestments fit within expected visual depictions. Moreover, those vestments have similar visual links throughout history such as head coverings, loose, flowing robes, and draped fabrics. Consider Mother Teresa, another well-known saint from the modern age. Her visual depictions don't veer too far away from standard saintly depictions as she is portrayed in the holy vestments

of her order, often smiling or praying. As a layperson, Acutis cannot rely on this visual link to previous saints. Thus, already by virtue of his generation and religious status the figure of Acutis poses challenges to our visual understanding of sainthood.

This challenge is further compounded by the very vehicle that facilitated his canonization: the internet. Unlike the singular direction in which a painted icon or published memoir allows a saint to interact with a believer, and the singular direction in which the Church dictates official iconography, the internet, at its core, is an omnidirectional force, and it has a new artistic direction in mind for Acutis: kitsch.

Kitsch: Emotion, Function, and Class

The internet is not often regarded as a place of high culture. Much in the same way the term “saint” conjures specific images, so too does the “internet”: maybe one thinks of memes, or short-form videos, or the nasty underbelly of social media comments. For all that it has been theorized to be, the internet is a uniquely participatory vehicle, which means that in dealing with internet-based media we must contend with the vastness of humanity itself: both its diversity, but especially in this case, its common denominators. This brings us to the next critical element in understanding the varied digital iconography of Carlo Acutis: kitsch.

It is unsurprising that kitsch would exist side-by-side with digital culture and media. Much in the way that the internet was a product of a technology revolution, many have argued that kitsch was a product of the industrial revolution (Greenberg, 1961, p. 9). Clement Greenberg (1961) also argues, somewhat scornfully, that kitsch relies on a “reservoir of accumulated

experience,” (p. 10) such as shared cultural codes and images and operates mechanically according to those elements. In a similar vein, memes and internet content also rely on shared cultural codes and operate in a semi-mechanical manner, as I discuss later on. The tension at the heart of kitsch also mirrors that of the internet: how is something that is deemed worthless or in poor taste, either through aesthetic lenses or other metrics, so immensely popular? As Tomas Kulka contends in *Kitsch and Art* (1996), “if all works of art were judged democratically – that is, according to how many people like them – kitsch would easily defeat all of its competitors” (p. 17)

Despite many scholarly attempts to resolve the inherent contradiction at the heart of kitsch – that something aesthetically bad has universal aesthetic appeal – have failed to reach consensus, kitsch continues to function as a powerful lens for understanding how images function in conjunction with normative standards and expectations in a culturally populist context. Kitsch is widely regarded as the antithesis to high art and culture. As art moved into avant-garde realms in the early 20th century and became self-reflexive (in other words, became art about art thus requiring the viewer to interpret works in relation to art and its specific histories and contexts), kitsch seemed to stand steadfast as an almost purely aesthetic experience for many consumers, more so than those who consumed high art. In other words, people consume kitsch not because it increases their social status or knowledge base in the way high art does, but rather they consume kitsch simply because they like it with nothing further to gain from than the pleasurable experience of looking (Kulka, 1996, p. 20).

Part of this pleasurable looking experience is tied to emotion: a key feature of kitsch is that it has a clear emotional charge (Kulka, 1996, p. 26), whether that is sad, happy, etc. While the notion of aesthetics being tied to pleasure and emotion is nothing new, what is unique is that kitsch operates in these realms in a purely normative, almost mechanically prescribed manner. As Kulka (1996) points out, kitsch “comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them,” (p. 27) thus allowing viewers to not only respond in an emotional way to the work that is pleasing in and of itself, but to respond to them in the “correct” way, touching on a secondarily pleasurable, evolutionary experience that comes from adhering to group behaviors. We, as humans, are social creatures and want to be a part of the “in group” – it is hardwired in our DNA for our survival. This innate drive is also what fuels the power of kitsch as it speaks to universal images and mass emotional appeal rather than individual idiosyncrasies in the way fine art does. Given this framework, it follows that religious iconography would function in a similar manner. As kitsch facilitates “correct”, acceptable, and normative emotional experiences, so too do devotional objects and religious art, which also aids in the formation of a cohesive social group of worshippers.

In discussing the power of kitsch, popular culture, and the desire for social group cohesion, it would be an oversight not to address the most obvious example of these forces at play: class. As Pierre Bourdieu outlined in his seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1987), class is deeply intertwined with aesthetic taste. The self-referential meanings of high art outlined previously are only available to those with the time, money, and education to access them, leaving the “naïve” spectator unable to grasp those

meanings since they lack the cultural codes to do so (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 2-4). As a result, he argues, working class spectators take a more straight-forward approach in expecting art to perform a clearly visible function and their judgments of art “often make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 5) This class distinction and framework easily maps onto Kulka’s theory of kitsch as being a genuine aesthetic experience that functions on a normative basis to produce “correct” (read: agreeable) responses. As such, we are left with a paradigm in which kitsch is tied to the working class in Bourdieu’s terms, or, in today’s shifting and eroding class structure, a paradigm in which kitsch is tied to almost all classes except the elite upper echelon of society, statistically rendering it a dominant popular culture vehicle. If we consider the fact that upwards of 60%³ of the global population uses the internet and that only 7% of the world’s population is classified as “high income”⁴ (according to the Pew Research Center), it is not a stretch to conclude that the vast majority of internet users belong to the non-elite classes and would thus function in a kitsch-based framework. Rather than being the unsavory shadow of respectable fine art, I would argue that kitsch has become the dominant form and function of media in our digital age, which has had an impact on religious iconography and worship as churches move online in an attempt to engage younger generations of believers.

Religious organizations responding to popular demands is not a new phenomenon. There are already several instances in a Catholic context in which the Church has bowed to the power

³ This number varies slightly depending on the source with Our World in Data estimating around 63% in 2023 whereas World Bank Open Data estimates closer to 68% for 2024.

⁴ For more information, consult: Pew Research Center (2015)

of popular belief, such as the eventual endorsement of Our Lady of Fatima after millions of pilgrims flocked to the site of the apparition. As much as the Church determines normative and popular forms of iconography and worship, so too does it respond to popular aesthetic demands. Take for example “Luce,” the anime mascot for the Vatican’s Jubilee year in 2025 (Figure 3). Created by Simone Legno, the founder of the Japanese-inspired brand tokidoki, Luce is a Catholic pilgrim with large, anime-style blue eyes and blue hair accompanied by her companion dog, Santino, and is joined by a cast of pilgrim friends of varying national origins (presumably to appeal to Catholics across the globe) rendered in the same “chibi”-esque⁵ style. Representing the Holy See for the first time ever at an Italian comic convention and later at Expo 2025 in Japan, Luce was designed with pop culture in mind. According to Archbishop Fisichella, who unveiled Luce, she was inspired by the Church’s desire to “live even within the pop culture so beloved by our youth” (McLellan, 2024). Between Luce and Acutis, it would appear that the Church is making a concerted visual effort to modernize and engage an increasingly-digital generation of worshippers. What is notable in the case of Acutis, however, is that the Church seemingly has not only entirely bowed to popular contemporary imagery with no major attempt to assimilate Acutis into flowing robes and palm fronds, but that for the first time, the digital populace is creating its own separate set of saintly iconography through the language of kitsch.

⁵ “Chibi” refers to a specific anime style in which character proportions are notably skewed and exaggerated to produce a “cuter” silhouette, often with large heads, short limbs, and large eyes.

Figure 3

Luce – The Vatican's anime mascot of the Jubilee year for 2025



Note. From *Luce*, by S. Legno, Catholic News Agency

(<https://www.ewtnnews.com/vatican/meet-luce-the-vatican-s-cartoon-mascot-for-jubilee-2025?redirectedfrom=can>) Copyright 2024 S. Legno/Vatican Media.

Add to Cart: A Visual Analysis of Devotional Objects on Etsy

In discussing the prevalence of online kitsch in a religious context, Etsy has proven to be a prime vehicle for viewing its varied applications and uses. Etsy is an e-commerce site that has distinguished itself as a retailer of handmade and vintage goods, a digital marketplace for makers and artisans. Standing in contrast to the more corporate, industrialized Amazon, Etsy has branded itself as a place to purchase more personalized, meaningful gifts and products, which fits with the emotional and personal drives of devotional objects. Additionally, anyone can make an Etsy

shop to sell products, which serves as a good proxy for the varied, democratic nature of the internet and its users. In looking at listings for Carlo Acutis on Etsy, we see a varied application of kitsch that speaks to not only how kitsch functions in a digital realm, but also how worshippers are asserting their own aesthetic preference in the crafting of holy iconography.

One such instance comes as a poster of Acutis styled in the manner of the iconic Barack Obama Hope poster from his 2008 presidential campaign (Figure 4). The poster is sold by a shop called PC3Designs who has been on the site since early 2025 and whose wares are largely posters of prominent Catholic figures, rendered in a bold, graphic style highly reminiscent of Shepard Fairey. The poster of Acutis not only borrows a similar color palette from Fairey's piece, but also features the same placement of text at the bottom as well as the simplified flattening of facial planes and shadows characteristic of the original. Rather than saying "HOPE," the poster instead reads "NOT I, BUT GOD," one of Acutis' mottos.

On the surface, this is a bizarre combination of visual cues and styles. Acutis was not American, was not a politician, and his "campaign" for sainthood has no shared elements with a political election campaign since the canonization process is not democratic and does not involve the general public. The rationale lies in the way Fairey's piece has become a visual archetype, divorced from its original context. There are countless parodies of the Hope poster: in fact, in Google the second-most popular search after "Obama Hope poster" is "Obama Hope poster generator." The poster has come to function as a visual meme in a variety of contexts, being recreated with figures such as Homer Simpson saying "D'OH" or the Joker saying "JOKE" and even the occasional current senator or political figure. While users are sometimes still aware of,

and utilize, the original function of the image to elevate a figure or inspire viewers, such as in Figure 4, it has also become a fully-fledged meme.

While the exact definition of “meme” is shifting and still debated, at its core it involves an element of digital media that is produced and reproduced by a large number of users with an awareness of the original source material and other memes (pp. 4-8), according to Limor Shifman in his book *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014). Shifman (2014) argues that memes are not only cornerstones of participatory culture but that they serve a critical communicative function (pp. 4-8). In this sense, it is no surprise that kitsch is closely aligned with memes: both serve to communicate an idea or feeling to a large number of people using popular visual elements often with a prescribed response. Both visual memes and kitsch function as a “quick read” with their meanings becoming readily apparent to any viewer with an understanding of the base imagery. Furthermore, if we look at what types of memes go viral, there are clear links between memes and kitsch. Memes that go viral often have images associated with strong positive or negative emotions (much like the clear emotional quality of kitsch) and images that feature recognizable characters (drawing from collective culture like kitsch) or compositional close ups (an aesthetically pleasing choice much like kitschy art) are by far the most popular (Ling et al., 2021).

As such, in this Acutis poster, we see an almost-unsurprising convergence of kitsch and memes. That this poster is available for easy purchase for believers all across the globe speaks to the power of popular digital culture in shaping the images we consume and, by extension, worship with. It is not a stretch to imagine a more digitally-inclined Catholic opting for such a

poster over a traditional gilded icon, suggesting a shifting iconographic landscape that now millions of believers can participate in with a simple push of “add to cart.”

Figure 4

Carlo Acutis “HOPE” Poster



Note. From *Saint Carlo Acutis Poster* by PC3Designs, 2025, Etsy.com

(https://www.etsy.com/listing/4297774020/saint-carlo-acutis-poster-inspirational?ref=shop_home_feat_4&dd=1&logging_key=f35c182605fa6aff1598f17548e71fa17135cd49%3A4297774020)

Another common visual trope in Acutis devotional objects is pixilation, as seen in the pin and sticker of Acutis in Figures 5 and 6. Pixilation here functions as a reference to video games, which makes sense given that Carlo was a fan of video games during his lifetime and fits within the digital narrative being constructed around his sainthood. Here kitsch isn't functioning in the same emotional manner as in Figure 4, but is still functioning as imitation of something popular or mundane for an intended outcome. The pin in Figure 5, sold by the shop SaintSprites, depicts Acutis as a video game character sprite and is "perfect for Catholic gamers" according to the listing. The sticker in Figure 6, sold by GracefulHiveShop, also depicts Acutis as a video game sprite, but this time in the famous pose of Link from the original Legend of Zelda from 1986 with an addendum of "St. Carlo Acutis: Pray for Us" to the accompanying iconic phrase "It's Dangerous to Go Alone: Take This." Both of these objects go beyond the standard depiction of saints by moving into the visual language of video games, but do so in a way that is almost naïve imitation of their source material bringing them into the realm of kitsch. Here the intended functional outcome isn't an emotional response, but rather to serve as a devotional reminder in the daily lives of purchasers through wearing this pin or placing this sticker on a laptop. Both of these objects function in the Greenberg-ian sense of kitsch as mechanically operating according to shared visual codes, in this case, video games and personal, transportable devotional objects.

Figure 5

Carlo Acutis “Saint Sprites” Enamel Pin



Note. From *Saint Carlo Acutis Retro Video Game Pin* by SaintSprites, Etsy.com

(https://www.etsy.com/listing/1867721712/saint-carlo-acutis-retro-video-game?ls=r&ref=hp_recent_activity_hub-3&content_source=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b5372%253ALTb9b7f4693440510a269166af41c0ea6fe86b3dbe&logging_key=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b53)

Figure 6

Carlo Acutis Zelda Sticker



Note. From *St. Carlo Acutis Sticker: Catholic Gamer Vinyl Decal* by GracefulHiveShop, Etsy.com (https://www.etsy.com/listing/4359828027/st-carlo-acutis-sticker-catholic-gamer?ls=r&ref=hp_recent_activity_hub-6&content_source=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b5372%253ALT5a77fae3bc75681a605d5a93918a3bfaa6367045&logging_key=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9)

There are several other listings that utilize kitsch and its intersections with memes from plush toys of Acutis using a similar “chibi” style to Luce (Figure 7) to stickers for Acutis modeled on Pokémon cards (Figure 8) to more classically kitschy sentimental brushed aluminum portraits of Acutis (Figure 9). This utilization of kitsch as a popular art form in a digital

landscape points to a new system of participation in religion. Rather than having iconography and devotion function as a top-down system with the Catholic Church dictating norms, worshippers, through the participatory nature of the internet, are creating their own visual language for Carlo Acutis – one that utilizes kitsch as a representation of this culture of engagement. If kitsch is the visual strategy of the common people, it has reached new permutations through the actions of millions of global internet users.

Figure 7

Carlo Acutis Plush Figure



Note. From Saint Carlo Acutis Catholic Plush Doll – Millennial Saint – Confirmation Gift for Teens by littledropsusa, Etsy.com (<https://www.etsy.com/listing/4376377584/saint-carlo-acutis->

[catholic-plush-doll?ls=r&ref=hp_recent_activity_hub-8&content_source=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b5372%253ALTd1b8dc572c705ecc5ea471577e01c6fc5bb4f347&logging_key=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9\)](#)

Figure 8

Carlo Acutis Pokémon Cards



Note. From Saint Carlo Acutis “Miracle Archives” Sticker – Catholic Sticker – Laptop Journal

Bible Décor by SimpleSouthernMommy, Etsy.com

https://www.etsy.com/listing/4389476897/saint-carlo-acutis-miracle-archives?ls=r&ref=hp_recent_activity_hub-2&pro=1&content_source=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b5372%253ALTda8393e46b421877d0467ad53f96482d3d729814&logging_key=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af0

Figure 9

Brushed Aluminum Portrait of Acutis



Note. From Blessed Carlo Acutis Eucharistic fervor Icon Brushed Aluminum Web Programmer and Gamer WYD by HolyRosaryTeam, Etsy.com

(https://www.etsy.com/listing/1506391088/blessed-carlo-acutis-eucharistic-fervor?ls=r&ref=hp_recent_activity_hub-1&content_source=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f9b5372%253ALT79a56a7b44da7d1b904aeb9f42faed3de08ef127&logging_key=00c8622fe9114b357f2f6af00f)

Conclusion

Having now examined the utilization of kitsch in crafting the iconography of the millennial saint Carlo Acutis, the centuries-old question once again emerges: what role should art have in religion? Furthermore, the implicit inverse question also emerges: if religious beliefs dictate art, to what extent does art dictate religious beliefs? While Acutis' canonization is fairly recent, the novel elements of his sainthood, such as its markedly digital nature, are starting to indicate some potential answers to the latter question. As a saint whose life story was shaped by the internet, it is no surprise that both the Church and internet users are now influencing Acutis' legacy through the same means. The Church has made official moves to modernize using the figure of Acutis to draw in younger worshippers, from livestreaming his futuristic tomb to expediting the canonization process. Those younger worshippers have in turn used the internet to respond to Acutis, from leaving prayers in the comments of YouTube videos to creating their own iconography. They are using the language of kitsch and its intersections with memes as an indication of the power of shared cumulative culture and an expression of the open, participatory, non-elite class nature of the internet.

Acutis' iconography represents a rare instance which worshippers, not the Church, are dictating the depiction of a saint, thus upending the traditional hierarchical structure of Catholic visual culture. As these images continue to proliferate on Etsy and beyond, they might even come to shape devotional practices going forward, leading to increasing intersections of the digital and physical worlds of religion. Wearing a pixilated video game pin of Acutis on one's backpack could be a new form of daily devotion, a visual reminder of faith similar to hanging a

rosary on one's rearview window. While we are still in the early stages of this new paradigm of internet sainthood, the participation of internet users in active worship and image construction will certainly continue as more contemporary saints are canonized, leading to a realm in which chibi saints might one day exist side-by-side with gilded icons within Catholic churches.

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