THEODORE PRESCOTT

We See Jesus?

> But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death. . .
>
> —*Hebrews 2:9*

I may not be the person to write about popular Christian imagery. I grew up in a home that was politely Protestant. Both art and religion were accorded a genteel respectability; serious, refined, and worthy of study, but a little bit remote from the pressing concerns of youth and living. One of the artworks in our home was a good reproduction of a Raphael Madonna. It was behind glass, and had a gilt neo-classical frame with pillars and an entablature. Across the bottom it said "La Virgine col Bambino" in sunken Roman typeface. Even when I see it today, it has a gravity that I don't find in "museum quality" reproductions.

In Protestant New England I didn't have any direct experience with popular religious art. About as close as I came was through my friend Woody, an aspiring folk singer. He sang with an affected nasal style, and one of his favorite songs had the refrain "I don't care if it rains or freezes, as long as I got mah plastic Jezus, ridin' on the dash board of my car. . ." Of course, Catholics had lots of cheap statues and pictures. But as the song made clear, they were to be mocked for both superstition and bad taste, though I'm not sure which was the worst offense.

The first time I recall encountering any popular Christian pictures personally was in college. My roommate and I were returning from a party one night, arguing about who should drive. In the confusion, we collided with a car parked along the street. We would have left the scene of the accident, but since both cars were now locked together, reluctantly proceeded to report the mishap.

A heavy-set man in a bathrobe admitted us to the darkened split level nearest the car. It turned out that he was a Pentecostal minister and owned the car we'd hit. While we waited for the police and a tow truck, we sat in awkward silence in his living room. He put on a record—some kind of low background music that I now know was religious. It was an aural counterpart for the paneling, indirect

lighting, harvest gold shag carpeting, and heavy gold drapes that were drawn shut against the picture window. There were some family photographs on the television console, and on one wall was a large framed picture of Christ walking with two disciples along a road in a leafy landscape [see page 70]. I was in heartland American Christendom, but felt like I'd stumbled into a Diane Arbus photograph.

I saw that same picture of Christ and the two disciples about seven or eight years later in another preacher's house. The settings were similar. But in that intervening time I'd experienced what sociologists call a paradigm shift. As one might expect, I saw the picture a bit differently. I didn't like it, but I had come to care about the people who did.

I relate all of this to dispel any notion that my approach to popular Christian images is disinterested and impersonal. It is seen through mixed layers of experience, memory, education, and ambivalence. Popular Christian art creates problems for the artist who is a Christian. Its tendency towards mediocrity and sentimentality invite—yea, provoke—ridicule. But criticizing the art is so easy that any sensible individual who does so must feel like they are stalking dairy cattle with assault weapons.

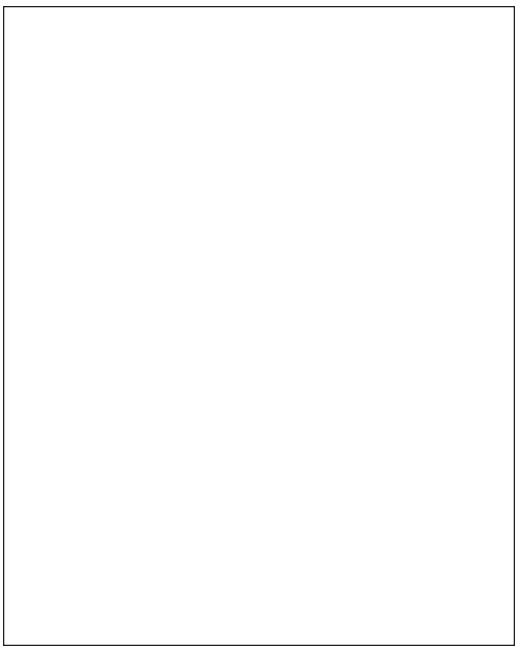
And like dairy cattle, the people that make and buy this art are pretty much minding their own business, grazing on their own turf. They have few pretensions about art, or artistic discourse. Their interests are in the faith, or perhaps business. So one hopes to find something good to affirm in popular Christian art, but fears that both art and faith may be crushed under a heavy burden of cultural baggage. Walker Percy, writing about the problems triumphant Sunbelt Christendom created for the novelist who is a Christian, said the trouble was, "he finds himself in bed with the wrong bedfellows." So why bother?

One reason to bother is because of the enormous popularity of mass produced Christian images. Warner Sallman, hardly a household name, is probably the most reproduced of all twentieth-century artists. Sallman, who died in 1968, painted his famous *Head of Christ* [see page 70] in 1940. It is estimated to have been reproduced 500 million times, and his other devotional images an additional 500 million. Like it or not, Sallman's head of Christ has been *the* image of Jesus for several generations of Americans, and continues to be sold and displayed today.

Another reason to attend to popular Christian images is that they have figured prominently in the lives of so many people. Modernist notions of aesthetics and art as an end in itself have no place here. These are devotional images, with stories of conversion, encouragement, and protection. They are closer in spirit to medieval piety than they are to the art of their own time.

Jason Knapp, who is the director of the Wilson Gallery at Anderson University

Robert Zund. **Way to Emmaus**.



Warner Sallman. **Head of Christ**.

in Anderson, Indiana helped organize a traveling exhibit of Sallman's work in 1994. Anderson co-owns many of Sallman's original paintings, along with Warner Press. Knapp wrote:

> During my first year as Director of the Galleries (1989-90), I was astonished by the number of requests from individuals and groups, sometimes prepared to travel great distances, who wished to see the collection or any single painting I might be willing to bring out of storage. These requests were often phrased in the language of a pilgrimage. Many viewers of the works shared emotional narratives with me about the importance of the images at critical moments in their lives. As an artist trained under the influence of modernism and its intellectual moorings, I was unprepared for the responses and stunned by the nature and quality of their personal reports.

Until recently, work like Sallman's received little attention outside of its circle of admirers. It was rendered almost invisible by a tendency to think that Protestants don't make religious pictures, and by the fact that the art world had no categories other than dismissive ones, such as kitsch, for it. In fact popular Christian art comes close to fulfilling the original meaning of kitsch (from a German word meaning "to put together sloppily"). It breaks three of the central taboos in modern art—against illustration, mass production, and devotional imagery. Things have changed with the postmodernist desire to explore the suppressed content of modernity's subconscious. One now occasionally sees quotations and appropriations of cheap Christian art. But the ironic embrace of postmodernist strategizing is not much better than modernist contempt.

The egalitarian who argues that it's only elitism and the legacy of modernist aesthetics that obscure the value of the popular arts isn't much help here. The fact is, as *illustration* a lot of popular Christian art doesn't stack up very well when it's compared to the work of highly regarded illustrators. Artists like Sallman make one realize the virtues of someone like N. C. Wyeth.

Since the late nineteenth century popular Christian artists have tended to avoid the abundant drama available in the Christian narrative and chosen instead softer, more comforting moments to depict. For instance, the German painter Heinrich Hoffman's *Christ in Gethsemane*, which was done around the turn of the century [see page 74], shows Jesus kneeling before a large rock in a dark, generalized landscape. His hands are clasped, but not in anguish or tension. His attitude and expression is watchful, expectant and waiting. Evidently he has already discerned that it is the Father's will that the cup will not pass from him, but it is hard to believe that this man has just been sweating drops of blood. Any sense of struggle and agony has been excised in favor of obedient repose.

Of course it might be argued that a preference for drama and suffering itself

reflects a modernist bias. Indeed modernism, in its disdain for the sweet and sentimental, has tended to darken the palette of human expression. Matisse and Monet notwithstanding, modern ideas of reality and authenticity have pushed artists towards a more disturbing sensibility. Why else would Munch's *The Cry* be one of the great seminal icons of modernity?

However the sentiments expressed in popular Christian art have another standard of comparison. If the work really *is* devotional art, the long history of Christian images are its logical precursors. As one surveys historic Christian imagery, particularly pictures of Jesus, one can't avoid the conclusion that what Christians have contemplated across the ages are solemn images, and often images of sorrow and suffering. Even triumphant subjects such as the Resurrection or the Descent into Hell, which might be seen as occasions of celebration, are suffused with an awe, reverence and distance appropriate to Divine mysteries.

So while popular Christian art maintains the appearance of tradition, it has actually broken with or altered Christian iconography in important ways. To be sure, recent popular Christian art remains traditional in the way it *looks*—the work of artists like Sallman, Zund or Hoffman have faint echoes (or sometimes embarrassingly direct quotations) of earlier artists and movements. Zund's *Way to Emmaus*, for example, draws on the conventions of the classical landscape, and Hoffman's *Christ in Gesthemane* recalls Baroque night paintings.

But in contrast to earlier Christian art, twentieth-century popular Christian images do not dwell on the history and stories of the faith. There are few episodes from Christ's passion, no notable crucifixions (unless one includes Salvador Dali's widely reproduced *Christ of St. John of the Cross* as popular Christian imagery), and little that is overtly liturgical or catechetical. Perhaps this is a legacy of the Reformation, a lingering Protestant bias against anything Catholic. Yet Catholic popular art has followed a similar trajectory in terms of sensibility even though it continues to be made up of stations of the cross, crucifixions, images of saints, and pictures of Mary. In fact Sallman produced both a *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and a *Mary, Mother of Christ* for the Catholic market.

This change in tradition turns the focus of art to the person of Jesus, and away from the narratives of his life. The art historian David Morgan has discussed the change in a short article about Sallman in the *Christian Century* and points out that Sallman's *Head of Christ* is "well suited to Protestants for whom the foundation of faith consists of a personal relationship with Jesus." Most are found in private homes and are not used in communal worship. Morgan also points out that the purpose of popular art is to confirm the beliefs and expectations of its audience. Popular art does not intend to challenge ideas or provoke new thoughts, or even to reveal truths slowly over time. Like the

commercial arts to which it is related, popular art is intended to produce an immediate effect, working directly upon the existing sentiments of the viewer.

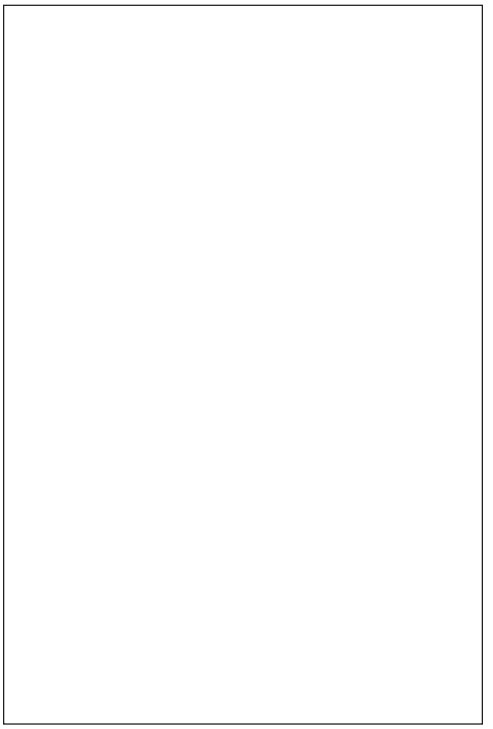
Thus popular Christian art has come to present the *personality* of Jesus as the paramount experience of the picture. It is not so much what Jesus is depicted as doing as how he looks that tells us who he is. This may help explain why the Jesus of popular Christian art has become increasingly comfortable to be around. As the century has progressed, Jesus has turned away from the pensive inwardness Sallman portrayed, to face us, greet us, assure us, invite us. It has always been difficult to balance the human and divine attributes in any picture of Christ, and this inability to picture it all is part of the complaint of the iconoclasts. If the medieval pictures of Christ were too stern, distant, and concerned with coming judgment, our own popular pictures seem too nice, too bland, too much one of us.

Part of the problem with popular Christian art is the *us* that shapes Jesus' identity. Much has been made of the distortions that occur when Jesus is pictured as white. While artists like Sallman were hardly the first to depict Christ with Caucasian features, the popular Jesus—the Sunday school Jesus—has often been noticeably Nordic. These pictures have been exported to all parts of the world along with missionary efforts.

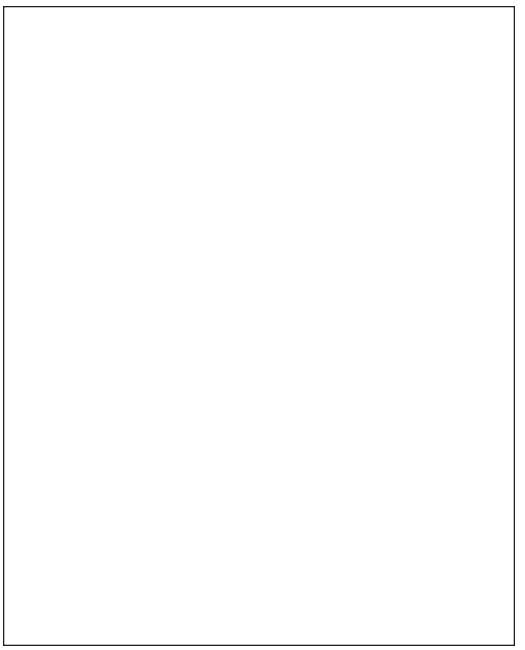
Richard Hook's Christ [see page 74] was developed in the 1960's to present a more contemporary picture of Jesus. Compared to Sallman, Hook's Christ is swarthier and perhaps slightly Semitic, though he's hardly a cousin to Yasir Arafat. Hook's Christ is more rugged as well. The change from Sallman's Christ is part of an ongoing redefinition of Jesus' masculinity, which has been a problem in popular Christian art. The critics of mass produced Christian art have long pointed out that Jesus—particularly in images developed in the nineteenth century—is usually effeminate and weak.

In fact, part of the origin of Sallman's Jesus was a call to make a more masculine Christ. At least that's the story told by Dicksons, a large religious and gift supply house. In the beginning of their catalog are short biographical sketches of some of the most popular Christian artists. The sketch about Sallman includes the following exchange with a Dr. O.E. Sellers, who was dean of the Bible School where Sallman was taking evening classes sometime during the 1920's:

> "I understand that you're an artist, Sallman, and I'm interested in knowing why you are attending this institute."
>
> "Well, I'm here because I wanted to increase my knowledge of the Scriptures. I want to be an illustrator of Biblical subjects."
>
> "Fine! There is a great need for Christian artists. Sometime I hope you give us your conception of Christ. And I hope it's a manly one. Most of our pictures today are too effeminate."



Heinrich Hoffman. **Christ in Gethsemane**.



Richard Hook. **Jesus and the Children**.

"You mean to say you think Jesus was a more rugged type? More of a man's man?"

"Yes, according to the way I read my Bible. We know he walked great distances and slept out under the stars; he was rugged and strong. He preached in the desert so he must have been tanned. More than that, the Word says he set his face 'like a flint' to go down to Jerusalem, so he wasn't soft or flabby. We need a picture of that kind of Christ, Sallman, and I hope you will do it some day."

Indeed Sallman's head may be more masculine than the earlier, nineteenth-century Christs. Yet for us the soft flowing hair, the smooth skin illuminated by a spiritually suggestive radiance, and the ambiguous tunic all work against our stereotypes of masculinity. In an essay that accompanied the recent Sallman exhibition, David Morgan notes that Sallman developed another head of Christ called *Lord and Master* (not reproduced) which was published in the early 1960's. Even though this Christ was visibly stronger and more muscular than the original 1940's portrait, the publisher requested additional roughening of the hair for fear that this Jesus might be considered too feminine.

So as popular pictures of Jesus have become more masculine in appearance, his character has correspondingly become more accessible. For all of the resonance between the rugged good looks of the American advertising male and Hook's Christ, the God-man is *not* the Marlboro man. Ruggedness is not used here to suggest characteristics than often accompany mass culture's ideas of masculinity, such as control over circumstances, self-sufficient individualism, emotional reserve, or an easy-going sexuality. What is interesting about the Jesus in Hook's *Jesus and the Children* is that he is both rugged and nurturing.

Hook has reworked a staple of Christian illustration. The subject is based on a brief account found in the synoptic gospels in which Jesus chastises the disciples for attempting to keep children from being brought to him for his blessing. He pointedly warns the disciples not to hinder children, and that unless they become like children, they will not be able to enter the kingdom of God. Then Jesus blesses the children. It is a story with many suggestive possibilities, but it is the end that has been the basis of popular illustrations. Pictures like Hook's are often found in Sunday school rooms or on Vacation Bible School posters.

The antecedents for Hook are the doleful yet saccharine Victorian chromolithographs—usually reproductions of nineteenth century European painters—of Christ with children. But the subject was portrayed much earlier by Rembrandt in the *Hundred Guilder Print* (not reproduced), which is widely recognized as one of the supreme examples of the printer's art. Rembrandt's print compresses all of the various narratives found in chapter nineteen of Matthew's gospel into one picture, including healing the sick, the dispute with the Pharisees over divorce, and the rich young man who wanted to inherit

eternal life. The children and their parents are only a few figures in a crowded scene; with characteristic economy, Rembrandt used Christ's raised left hand to simultaneously bless the children and summon the sick streaming in from an outer darkness.

Of course Rembrandt's ability to fuse multiple meanings and psychological depth into simple gestures is unparalleled. It would be mean-spirited to upbraid Hook for not being Rembrandt. But Hook's *Jesus and the Children* is a good example of the progressive stripping away of the narrative setting during the twentieth century. Even the late nineteenth-century paintings, which were far less ambitious and complex than Rembrandt's print, give some sense of being located in a narrative. With Hook's picture all external embellishments have been left out, apparently so we may more completely experience Christ's good-natured warmth. The focus of the picture is the emotional relationship that the children—and by extension we—have with Christ. He embraces and protects as he delights in the presence of the children.

In pictures like this it is easy to see the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus. But the shift towards emotional engagement and a warm, heartfelt relationship between Christ and us has other implications as well. It suggests that Jesus feels differently about his work and his time among us than has been traditionally pictured. Popular Christian art now sometimes pictures Jesus as enjoying himself. The solemnity or sorrow that formed the emotional bedrock of older Christian art meant more than seriousness of subject and a deep reverence for God. It was the result of an understanding that Jesus had *work* which was hard, full of conflict, and ultimately led to death. The Christian story has been told as tragedy. "Jesus wept."

I was browsing in a Christian bookstore named *Inspiration House* in rural Wisconsin when I first encountered *Jesus Laughing* [see page 78] by Ralph Kozak. In good Christian bookstore fashion, it had been laminated to a piece of wood, imitating decoupage. But I was really taken aback when I saw it. Jesus laughed?

Physically and stylistically this Jesus is in the genre of Hook's. The process is a bit cruder (felt tip markers imitating "impressionist" brush strokes, I believe), and the face appears a bit pinched and yet somewhat flabby at the same time. Even in the realm of popular Christian art this would be a forgettable picture were it not for the idea. One can't help wondering though—what is so funny? Why is Jesus laughing?

It is difficult to assess how important any particular aspect of current culture may really be. Anybody with experience in the arts has seen artists and movements that were hailed as ground-breaking and significant quickly fade into historical oblivion. The announcement that something is new and important is now just part of the mechanics of promotion. Yet I think that *Jesus Laughing*

does have a significance that is disproportionate to its modest artistic presence, and is in fact new. As far as I know, we have no tradition of pictures that show Jesus laughing. There is no iconography of mirth in Christian art.

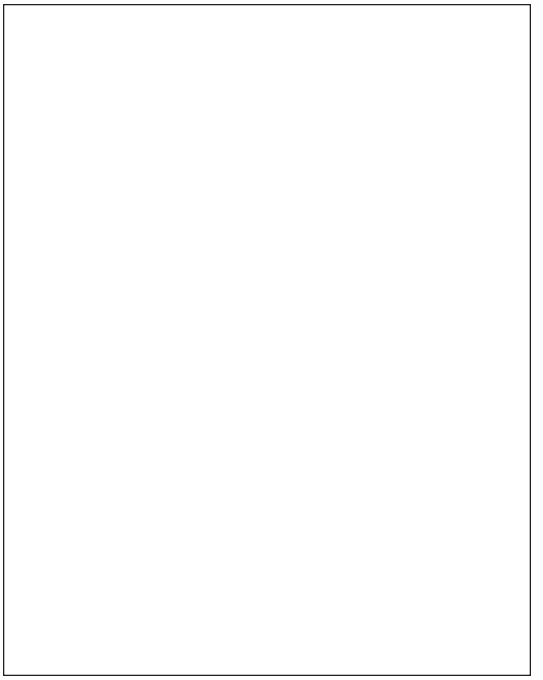
I do not know what the origins of *Jesus Laughing* are. The picture has been around for more than a decade, and evidently Frances Hook (Richard's wife) made a picture of Jesus laughing too. I suspect the idea springs from the same soil as a movement I recently became aware of called "Holy Laughter." In this movement worship leads to laughter, long sustained gales of laughter. Some people actually roll on the floor holding their sides. I think the point is that God has released us from our troubles, and that the joy of the Christian life is not necessarily decorous—it may erupt into wild fits of laughter. Laughter is seen as the proper expression of praise for an exuberantly good-natured Creator—a kind of cosmic "wild and crazy guy"—who wants his creatures to have a good time.

To depict Jesus laughing affirms his humanity, and may in fact be the proper response to his victory over sin, Satan, and death. Yet it is worth considering why at this point and in this culture the Man of Sorrows has been transformed into the Man of Laughs. I suspect it has more than a little to do with our culture's deep desire to feel good. Laughter here is a sign of well-being and that everything is really OK.

There is another picture that exemplifies our penchant to conflate cultural attitudes with religious subjects. Harry Anderson's *Prince of Peace* shows a monumental Jesus poised to knock on one of our most recognizable post-war buildings, the UN headquarters in New York. The painting has an immediate impact because here illustrative naturalism has been wedded to the old pre-Renaissance idea that size and scale signify importance and authority. Thus Jesus is equal in size to the building, yet it all seems "natural," particularly since he is not standing on the ground, but materializing from a cloud.

According to the biographical sketch in the Dicksons catalog, Anderson used to be an illustrator for *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post* in the 1940's and 1950's. Anderson's pastor sent samples of his work to their denominational publishing house. The art director there "had long had the idea of showing Christ in modern-day settings," and saw in Anderson someone "who could bring that idea to life." So Anderson started making religious art.

Generally, popular Christian art is not overtly symbolic in the way older art was. But Anderson actually used and adapted a gesture of special significance in popular Christian art—the knock. The British pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt was one of the great popularizers of the knock, which originates in early nineteenth-century German painting. Hunt's painting *The Light of the World*, done in the mid-nineteenth century was widely exhibited and reproduced, and a second version came to the United States in 1857. It shows Christ standing outside a locked, vine-encrusted door, knocking. The image is inspired by the



Ralph Kozak. **Jesus Laughing**.

Max Greiner, Jr. **Divine Servant**.

book of Revelation, where in the third chapter the "Amen" warns the lukewarm church at Laodicea: "Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...." The painting is interpreted as an allegory of the locked human heart, which can only be opened from within as someone hears and responds to the call of the gently persistent Christ. Warner Sallman utilized Hunt's work directly in a painting he did in 1942, *Christ at Heart's Door*.

Anderson has done other pictures that show Christ in contemporary settings. One, *The Counsellor* (not reproduced), depicts Christ in his traditional robe, seated in an office with a man in a three-piece business suit. The man is probably a banker or business executive. The two are deep in conversation, and the man leans toward Christ, apparently pouring his heart out as one might in prayer. Christ listens patiently and empathetically; the viewer feels that he will also speak wisely and comfortingly.

In the *Prince of Peace* Jesus' approach to the UN building is not hostile, but determined. One has the sense that there is a slight comeuppance implied here, a kind of wake-up call. If the United Nations is the human institution dedicated to the ideal of peace, it is now approached by the real and true source of peace. Given the UN's inability to check the scourge of warfare and suffering, Christ is understood to be the only reason for hope. And given the iconography of the knock, Anderson is saying that unless the nations of the world open up to Christ as each individual must, there will be no peace. This is a deeply evangelical image.

But in my experience the painting has other meanings too. It hung in the office of a young assistant pastor I knew, and he used to look at it and chuckle over the futility of our human efforts to achieve peace apart from God. Like a lot of conservative Christians, he believed the UN was trying to do things that only God could accomplish, and that when people put faith in its efforts they were misguidedly looking for human institutions to accomplish supernatural ends, which is close to idolatry. It is not a giant step from this line of thinking to the belief that the UN might be the precursor to the world government that accompanies the appearance of the Beast prophesied in Revelation. In fact in some circles the formation of the UN was interpreted as a sign of the end times. Thus Anderson's *Prince of Peace* had political overtones and could be interpreted in light of one type of American post-war eschatology.

I am not sure that Anderson meant for the *Prince of Peace* to be seen eschatologically. David Morgan says Anderson's denomination had strong anti-government sentiments that were justified by eschatology. In any event, it is often the fate of successful pictures to achieve a life and meanings apart from the artist's intentions. Artistic intentions have been discussed extensively in literature on twentieth-century art, but those discussions are not very helpful in thinking

about popular Christian art.

The reasons are not difficult to discern. The assumptions about art and artists found in the fine arts hardly have the popular Christian artist in mind. Ideas about divine inspiration, art as a career and livelihood, or reaching the widest possible audience with the Good News are marginalized in critical theory. Correspondingly, concepts like originality, the unfettered life of the imagination, and the thrill of challenging the middle class are not what drive the Christian populist.

Originality in particular seems to be an idea that has little place in popular Christian art. Many artists are obviously reworking the material of other artists, and make only slight adjustments to their source. Probably the most egregious examples of both bad taste and the unprincipled appropriation of earlier artists works are found in the reworking of famous old religious paintings. Most Christian bookstores sell these items. I have seen Leonardo's *Last Supper* rendered as a plastic stand-up relief, a glow-in-the-dark picture, and as a garishly colored optical illusion of movement which is created by the lamination of thick, lined plastic on top of the print. Ostensibly these are reproductions of Leonardo's work. But all of the atmosphere, beauty and mystery of the *Last Supper*, which just *might* be evoked by a good print, is brutalized beyond recognition.

One can understand how objects like these might function as prizes in carnival contests, for those are their cultural relatives: big, lascivious, pink, furry bears and glow-in-the-dark jelly charm bracelets. But the ability of these pictures to stimulate any religious piety seems doubtful. These works are stars in the freak show of religious art. Ironically, their badness as art and as religion is so total, so perfectly realized, that they have a strange and compelling presence.

However, the problem of originality is more nuanced than these examples suggest. All artists learn from and use the work of other artists. It is simply an unavoidable part of the artistic process. One can, for example, find quotations from and homages to Michelangelo's figures in other artists work from the sixteenth century to the present. Problems arise when artists don't digest the work they've been looking at, when they proclaim it as their own, or when they suggest that they are a conduit for a picture that comes from above.

Sallman's painted *Head of Christ* was done in 1940, but a charcoal sketch *The Son of Man* (not reproduced), which is essentially the same picture, was made in 1924. It was done for the cover of a magazine, and for years Sallman explained that he had a vision of the head after a frustrating and unproductive day in the studio. The sketch followed the vision.

Yet in 1922 the *Ladies Home Journal* reproduced *The Friend of the Humble* by the nineteenth-century French academic painter Leon Lhermitte, which shows Christ seated at a table with a group of peasants. There is an undeniable

correspondence between Sallman's and Lhermitte's pictures of Christ, and several artists questioned Sallman's story. In a 1961 article Sallman admitted he had seen the work, but explained that he'd probably recalled it from his subconscious. David Morgan thinks that it's likely that Sallman used a reproduction of Lhermitte's painting as he made the charcoal sketch, but later forgot about it. Morgan does not think Sallman was being consciously deceitful in his accounts of the origins of the head. What is interesting is that Sallman's stories about how he got the image of Christ follow the intellectual shifts of our century: an earlier supernaturalism is relocated to the subconscious.

Max Greiner, Jr. is a contemporary Christian artist who has created a sculpture of Jesus washing Peter's feet. *Divine Servant* [see page 78] comes in different sizes, editions, and media. Max sells the work directly, and provides a detailed catalog that is part testimony to God's grace, part personal history, and part business promotion.

In the catalog Max tells how he had been a wildlife and nature artist in Southeast Texas and had attracted a substantial following of collectors. He built his dream home and studio in the country and "pursued fame, fortune, and fun." But a series of troubles, including the collapse of the art market and his wife's life-threatening illness, changed things. The pressures on him drove him to read his Bible from cover to cover, and his life changed.

He tells of the origin of *Divine Servant*:

> It was during this time of humbling, in the Spring of 1986, that God spoke clearly into my mind, in His "still small voice," telling me to create a sculpture of Jesus washing Peter's feet. I chose to disobey, since I could not see how this could help solve our financial, medical or marriage problems. However, I did promise God that someday I would do this sculpture, realizing He was trying to teach me about servanthood and humility.
>
> Our situation got worse. Finally, after repeated prompting by the Holy Spirit, and Methodist friend, Jim Beard, I yielded. In the Spring of 1989, I finished the first *Divine Servant* bronze sculpture, 1/6 lifesize. I had absolutely no idea of where God was taking me.
>
> Like the little boy who brought his five small loaves and two small fishes to Jesus, I stand in amazement of the ways God has multiplied my small offering, which is now touching millions of people for Christ, around the world. If we will obey, God can use each one of us.

In contrast to Sallman, Greiner does not attribute the image to a dream or vision. Yet its source is found in God's call, and Greiner's creation of *Divine Servant* is a story of testing, obedience, and a willingness to set aside the artist's idea of what should be done in order to follow Christ. Thus his art is an extension of his spiritual life, and its success is not gauged by a fulfilled personal vision, but by submission to God's will.

The Greiners have a life-size version of *Divine Servant* mounted on a special trailer so they can travel around to churches, and conferences testifying to God's love and mercy in their lives. In the catalog Greiner reports that supernatural healings and miraculous provisions for people have occurred as they minister with *Divine Spirit*. This is light-years away from mainstream ideas about art and faith, and Max acknowledges, in the letter that accompanies his catalog, that "a few of you think we are from another planet." Indeed, his story has more to do with Chartres or Vezelay than with contemporary Manhattan.

Max is aware of the theological framework of his audience. He knows that they care about authenticity in both art and religion, and are not predisposed to accept just any picture of Christ. He has made an effort to be as real and accurate as he can be, and says he consulted "photographs of drawings of Jesus and Peter made by an unknown first-century artist" which were found in the catacombs. These are "reported to be the oldest known portraits of the men." The catalog also addresses questions that might arise about graven images, long hair, the propriety of Jesus being clad only in a towel, and why one should buy art when they could feed the poor. And, with a characteristically American touch, all of this is followed by a toll-free number and credit card and shipping information. Because the Greiners estimate that over $500,000 from the sale of *Divine Servant* has been given to charities and ministries, it is safe to assume that sales are going well. Perhaps *Divine Servant* will someday occupy the pride of place in popular Christian culture that Sallman's head once did.

Since our popular pictures of Jesus are so intertwined with the images and ideas of our larger culture, we can expect that a new Jesus will emerge. I believe he is waiting in the wings, if he hasn't already appeared. Perhaps this Jesus will look something like *Warriors: The Dragon Slayer* [see page 84] which purports to be a picture of the victorious Christian armored in God's strength. The textual source for the image given on the poster is Romans 16:20 where the Christian is assured that "The God of Peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

The actual source of the image is the blatant appropriation of recent film and network television characters. This warrior is part Luke Skywalker and part He-Man from *Masters of the Universe*. A student of mine pointed out that the gesture of the raised sword mimics He-Man's moment of empowerment.

Christ as action figure? Airbrush gleams and reflections that signify spiritual power instead of hard surfaces and new products? This picture may be the logical fruit of the parental desire to make Jesus visible and *relevant*. Bible stories have already been rendered as video cartoons, so why not allegorize Jesus' supernatural power as a kind of science fiction deep magic? Isn't that what C. S. Lewis did in his science fiction trilogy?

This Christ—the Christ as cosmic knight—might also dovetail with the

growing interest in the idea that the church is at *war* with the supernatural forces of evil. One only needs to recall the enormous success of Frank Perretti's *This Present Darkness* and its sequels to sense the depth of that interest. What should give us pause is the possibility that with the superficial lamination of Christian ideas onto action heroes, the values and attitudes of Saturday morning television will be baptized. In retrospect, the "gentle Jesus meek and mild" that has been so prevalent in this century begins to look fairly attractive.

Cliff Davis's *The Conformist* [see back cover] is obviously modeled on Sallman's *Head of Christ*. In fact Davis had a wallet-sized copy of Sallman's picture when he was young. His own painting was stimulated by the realization that Sallman's Christ wouldn't be admitted to the Christian college where Davis teaches, unless Jesus first got a hair cut. The college has a number of rules about behavior and appearance, including one that prohibits men's hair from hanging over their shirt collar. So Davis proceeded to create a Christ that would meet the college's codes.

This Christ's hair is well above his shirt collar. He also wears a white shirt and tie, and has a small American flag pin in his lapel. This Christ might well be the treasurer of a small Rotary club, and he probably fishes on the weekends. In this picture Davis has reified the values held dear by the people who think Sallman painted a *portrait*. Davis's Christ really looks like he would be more comfortable in the 1950's than today, and there is some sad irony in that cultural gap.

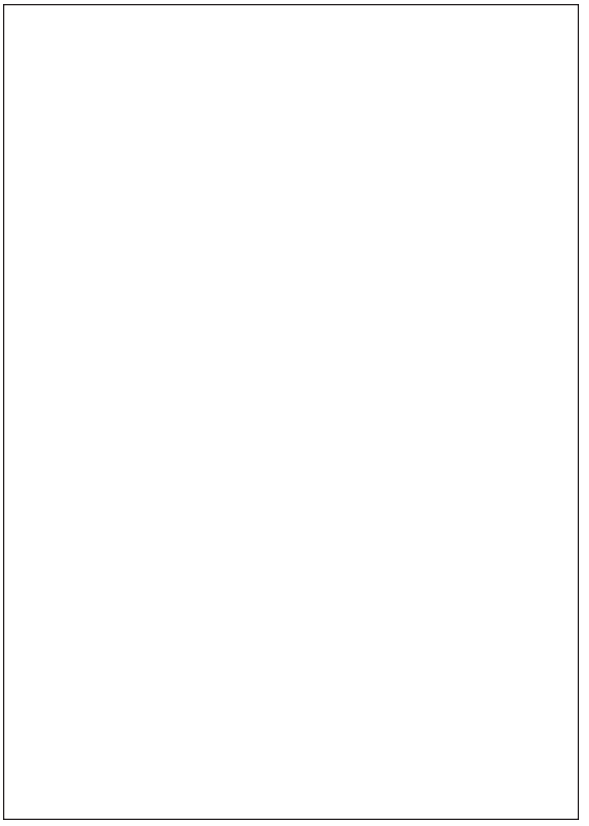
Many people have interpreted Davis's work as a send-up of the culture that venerates Sallman's Christ. Davis admits that is a valid way to see the picture, but says it really wasn't his primary concern. He says he wanted to make the connection between the picture of Christ and its audience obvious. The character of *The Conformist* is so clearly taken from its *audience* that the picture casts doubt on all pictures of Christ. Are we simply gazing lovingly at our own reflection, seen through a glass darkly?

Of course this is not a new problem. The earliest pictures of Jesus, such as *The Good Shepherd*, were modeled on existing Greek ideas and forms. The fifteenth-century Swiss artist Conrad Witz painted a picture of Christ walking on Lake Geneva's water. There is in fact no way to have a picture of Christ that is not culturally tainted. Each culture, each epoch, finds in Christ someone to address its needs, and bear its conception of reality. But that does not fully explain our situation.

Our problem is unique because the American Protestant tradition has developed along with mass media, and is often a religious expression of popular culture. In this tradition there is little besides stained glass that passes for art, and pictures of Christ have been developed for personal rather than communal and liturgical needs. And over time, these pictures of Christ have broken free from the moorings of historical narrative to be blown about by individual

preferences and marketing techniques.

The most troubling aspects of browsing in Christian catalogs or bookstores today is not the commercialism, artistic anorexia, or sense of unreality that is so often a part of the experience. Rather it is that there are so many Christs, each bearing his own little fragmented cultural imprint. The figure of Christ has passed from the church to the world, and in *this* world the continual multiplication of images appears to be its own justification, logic, and end. While this situation may be a wonderful expression of individualism, pluralism, and cultural democracy, it is bought at the price of depth and coherence in art and faith. Would Bernard of Clairvaux meet his religious needs at *Inspiration House*?



Cliff Hawley. **Warriors: The Dragon Slayer**. © 1995. C. Hawley