

The Religious Art of Andy Warhol, by Jane Daggett Dillenger

reviewed by [Cliff Edwards](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Andy Warhol's images of soup cans, brillo boxes, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Mao Tse-tung have been silk-screened onto our consciousness. Warhol has often been portrayed as obsessed with commercial success. He courted the wealthy and famous, surrounded himself with the denizens of the drug culture and hired beautiful young men to pose for his "porno-nudes."

Jane Dillenger, art historian and dean of the religion and art movement in American seminaries, wants us to discover quite another Warhol: the "shy, reclusive, and religious" son of the pious Byzantine Catholic immigrant Warhola family. She speaks of Warhol's "deep personal piety," notes that he attended church regularly, fed the poor on holidays, and concluded his career by producing a "cycle of profoundly religious paintings."

Although I would gratefully acknowledge my own debt to Dillenger's lifetime of work at the difficult intersection where religion and art meet, I find this book misleading and misdirected. The voluminous Warhol sources indicate that Dillenger has not discovered another Andy Warhol; she has created one. She presents an unlikely portrait of a saintly Warhol, a myth that deflects our attention from the complex, eccentric and sometimes perverse artist who made a monumental contribution to the history of art.

The book recounts a search that began when Dillenger was "transfixed" by a photo of Warhol's studio displaying one of his paintings based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. That image led her to track down more than 100 drawings, prints and huge paintings by Warhol inspired by that *Last Supper*. Though Warhol also did other works based on religious paintings and on religious tracts, it is especially these *Last Supper* paintings, Dillenger claims, in which his "concealed religiosity flowed freely into his art." In them, she affirms, Warhol's "mastery and his deepened spiritual awareness" evoke "the Sublime." She goes on: "His final series on the last supper is the grandest and most profound cycle of paintings by this prolific, enigmatic, and complex artist."

This myth of the deeply spiritual Warhol creating a profoundly religious cycle of paintings did not originate with Dillenberger. It began with art critic John Richardson's eulogy for Warhol in 1987. Speaking at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, Richardson extolled Warhol's "hidden side," a devout spirituality which was "the key to the artist's psyche." Warhol's "secret piety" hid from the world his "impregnable innocence and humility," his existence as a "saintly simpleton" in the tradition of Russian Slavic piety. In Richardson's view, Warhol energized sacred objects, creating "a major breakthrough in religious art." Dillenberger quotes this entire eulogy at the beginning of her book.

It would be a mistake to take Richardson's eulogy as more than a moving appreciation by a friend, or to consider Dillenberger's volume as proof of this secret Warhol of saintly religiosity and profoundly positive religious art. To do so would be to lose our sense of the honest contributions of the idiosyncratic Warhol out of preference for the misdirected myth that he was St. Andy.

People will come closest to the true Warhol by reading the 800 pages of his diaries or by looking again at his lucrative portraits of the rich and famous, his paintings of multiple soup cans, guns, Perrier bottles, brillo boxes, nudes, shoes, lips, dollar signs, currency and comic strips. These multiple images of popular iconic commodities cast a revealing light on Warhol's similar replication of popular religious icons. Warhol was fascinated by any image that caught the public eye, by the iconic commodity value of either a Mickey Mouse, a gun or a cheap replica of Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

Did Warhol's hidden sainthood blossom at the end of his life? I don't think so. During his final months, he described the opening of his Last Supper show in Milan as "scary and stupid," and was far more excited about the exhibit of what he called his "porno-nude" photos. He was frightened of aging, and obsessed with his hair, facelifts, designer clothes, and which of his acquaintances was sleeping with whom. He worried that he might be allergic to his Armani teddy-bear coat or the Larissa leather coat he slept with. He pledged to get commissions for portraits from more "rich ladies." He made jokes about the "nobodies" who got in his way and his disgust with the "dirty and unwashed." He gossiped endlessly, and was "soooo bored."

Warhol did go to church regularly and helped feed the poor three times a year. He honored his parents' piety, a piety that connected going to church with "getting to heaven." But he wanted no part of the church's community, its rites of confession or

the mass. He seems to have fed the poor because one of his associates worked out a schedule to distract Warhol from his customary depression during holidays. But, Warhol writes, "I don't look those people in the eye."

Warhol was a very eclectic believer and even an evangelist for his odd collection of beliefs. He believed in his skin doctor, his chiropractor, his trainer and especially his crystal doctor. He went nowhere without his protective and his healing crystals. At the end of his life he tells of one of his last visits to his crystal doctor, who "used a lot of crystals on me like the long skinny ones and for the first time I really completely totally believed in it." And he told all his friends about his gurus.

In countering the St. Andy myth I don't want to be seen as devaluing Warhol. This often frightened and always eccentric artist convincingly demonstrated that we are a people of many icons, and that we harbor deep feelings for an array of symbols, always in the process of being shattered and recreated. Warhol showed us the poignancy of the meanings we give to common commodities, even to religious commodities. And he did this with a humor that unmasked the pretensions of an art market that often presented itself as a high priesthood dispensing expensive icons that would increase in monetary value.