

CHOOSING A CONSTITUENCY

One-for-All

Thomas Kinkade

Born 1958 Placerville, California

1976–1978 University of California, Berkeley, fine art

1976–1978 Center College of Design, Pasadena, fine art

Lives and works in Los Gatos, California

Thomas Kinkade is an artist who, instead of working in isolation, is associated with a corporate empire that facilitates the accomplishment of his goal—to spread his vision of peace and harmony throughout the culture. Kinkade is devoted to creating art that appeals to the majority. But even more attention is directed to creating distribution outlets to realize this ambition. His work not only satisfies popular tastes and expectations, it employs marketing channels beyond the confines of the art world, occupying popular sites that promote mass-produced housewares, collectibles, and books. Accountants, marketers, manufacturers, publicists, distributors, and lawyers contribute to realizing Kinkade's mission.

It is no exaggeration to report that the painter Thomas Kinkade is dedicated to making his art a presence in every American household. Indeed, he has almost succeeded. He claims that one in every twenty American homes has a Kinkade work displayed in it. By aspiring to become "a leading art-based brand," he epitomizes the artist for whom popular approval is the all-abiding principle. Kinkade is the self-proclaimed "Painter of Light." But he might also be called the Sun King of Art since throngs of people are captivated by the otherworldly glow that suffuses his favorite subjects: cozy cottages, blossom-bursting gardens, picturesque waterfalls, quaint arched bridges, and distant mountain vistas. The incandescent radiance of his paintings is formidable, amplified to spill beyond their frames and into the living and working environments of their owners, who are thereby infused by a perpetual state of rapture. This at least is the assertion made in his promotional material; it declares that Kinkade's work appeals to an all-pervasive impulse, the "nesting" instinct.

Having created several hundred hand-painted images, Kinkade's output is measurable according to standards set by industry and commerce, not art. Still, he cannot produce enough originals to satisfy his evangelical ambition. He explains his mission: "I represent the forefront of an entirely new trend, a populist movement that takes images people understand and creates an iconography for our era.... We are creating an avalanche of imagery that is impacting the world."¹ The use of the word "we" is significant. Paintings are usually one-of-a-kind artworks painted one-at-a-time by a single creator. Kinkade's paintings, however, form the basis of multitudes of multiples—proofs, editions, and "collections" spawn an array of subcategories. Proofs are categorized by the following designations: Artist, Exhibitor, Gallery, Publisher, International Publisher, and Studio proofs. Editions are identified by another set of defining terms: Portfolio, Renaissance, Studio Proof Paper, and Master editions. Collections are listed as Plein Air, Studio Impressionism, French Impressionism, Brushwork, Classics, Accessories, Magnet, Media, Nightlight, and Photo Frame collections. In addition, Kinkade productions include "Inspirational" and "Collectors" prints.

This array of products is marketed to the public via an extensive network of over 300 independently owned Thomas Kinkade stores, known as the Signature Thomas Kinkade Galleries.

SCOPING AN AUDIENCE

Excerpt taken from Linda Weintraub's *In the Making*, Distributed Art Publishers, NY, 2003



His dissemination strategies also include *Light Posts for Living*, a book illustrated with Kinkade paintings that celebrates, according to its promotional literature, "American pastimes and values." *A Child's Garden of Verses* proffers this inspirational message to the youngest members of the public. These titles are just two (of 127) books illustrated and/or written by Kinkade. But Kinkade does not limit opportunities of engaging with his work to viewing and reading. It is possible to sit on a Kinkade, sleep on a Kinkade, and eat on a Kinkade. A licensing agreement with La-Z-Boy Furniture resulted in the production of upholstered and wood furniture decorated with Kinkade images; similar arrangements are in place for the manufacture of home decorative accessories; and Goodwin Weavers is licensed to create a full line of Thomas Kinkade pillows, placemats, table runners, wall tapestries, and bell pulls. Items emblazoned with his images also include vases, trays, mugs, and ornaments that are distributed through gift shops, department stores, and catalog retailers. Furthermore, relationships have been formed with Hallmark for Kinkade-branded stationery items, Avon for gift products, and QVC for unlimited-edition paper lithographs. A Kinkade Museum and Cultural Center has been established in Monterey, California, and internet opportunities for disseminating spiritual light have not been neglected: a Kinkade screen saver is also available. Still in the planning stage are craft and activity kits for the "do-the-Kinkade-yourself" market and a series of novels based on his paintings.²

Plentiful inducements exist to make purchasing his work a frequently recurring practice. For example, by creating works in series, Kinkade encourages consumers to become collectors. Collectors are afforded the opportunity to strengthen their commitment by joining the Thomas Kinkade Collectors' Society (with over 20,000 members, the society is as "exclusive" as Kinkade gets). Serious admirers graduate from collector rank to investor status when they become shareholders in Media Arts Group, Inc., a publicly traded company dedicated to producing and circulating the works of Thomas Kinkade. The financial status of the company can be researched by ordering its Annual Report on Earnings, but information can also be acquired through the Securities and Exchange Commission. Shares are traded on the Nasdaq National Market, and Kinkade is the only painter whose work is traded on the New York Stock Exchange. In 1999, Media Arts Group, Inc. posted \$126 million in revenues and \$84 million in profits. The complicated agreement between Kinkade and the company that markets his work can be summarized as follows: the artist receives five percent of net sales. He is a wealthy man.

But creating art that pleases the eye and satisfies the soul is not sufficient to earn mass appeal. The artwork must also provide evidence that it has earned the status of a masterpiece. People demand the authentic mark of the artist's brushstroke and signature. Kinkade's lithographs may not be originals, but that does not interfere with their having the aura of an original bestowed upon them. Not only do collectors receive certificates of authenticity, each work bears the signature of Thomas Kinkade applied in DNA-infused ink, thus assuring double authentication of the signing process. According to the literature that accompanies each purchase, the canvas versions of the lithographs are hand-highlighted to create the appearance of original paintings. The value of the altered lithograph varies depending on who performs the operation. "Highlighters," as they are called, range from dozens of workers who each contribute some detail to a single image, to "master highlighters" who have been trained by Kinkade himself. But the works that are most coveted carry the mark of the master. They have been highlighted by Kinkade's very own hand. As an added bonus to consumers, this factory-produced art can be further personalized: at openings, anyone purchasing a work is entitled to become Kinkade's collaborator by "dabbing" their own lithograph for an extra fee. Because the editions are extensive, but not unlimited, collectors are urged to order before they sell out, a real and frequent occurrence.