

## Thomas Kinkade: A Case Study on the Dichotomy between Market Value and Criticism of Kitsch Art

### ABSTRACT

Born in 1958 and died in 2012, Thomas Kinkade was an American painter who was considered a kitsch artist. He was known for painting a perfect version of reality and depicting pastel scenes, including gardens, bridges, and cottages. The market loves his art, but art critics hate it. Kinkade generated 130 million USD in sales at his height in 2001, while critics railed against him, labelling his artworks kitsch. Although this phenomenon is common in kitsch art, its dichotomy between market value and criticism is interesting to investigate. Art criticisms usually affiliate with market conditions and are competent to defy them. Still, they do not seem to impact kitsch art's market value. By exploring Thomas Kinkade's art, the reasons leading to this dichotomy are identified. This essay concludes that one of the primary reasons for kitsch art's dichotomy between market value and criticism is the level of art education background of the public and critics.

### INTRODUCTION

What is the one thing that the artworks *Balloon Dogs* (Fig. 1), *A Friend in Need* (Fig. 2), and *Chinese Girl* (Fig. 3) has in common? The answer relates to this essay's topic, which is kitsch art. All the artworks mentioned above are considered *kitsch* by art critics.



Fig. 1 *Balloon Dog (Blue)* by Jeff Koons (1994-2000)



Fig. 2 *A Friend in Need* by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge (1903)



Fig. 3 *Chinese Girl* by Vladimir Tretchikoff (1952)

The term *kitsch* has been used negatively for a very long time. Since the 1860s, the Munich painters and art dealers referred to “cheap artistic stuff” as *kitsch* (Călinescu & Călinescu, 1987). In modern society, *kitsch* describes objects that are “ugly, without style or false,” but “enjoyed by some people” simultaneously, as reflected by its definition in the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.). Art critics have heavily criticized kitsch art. Yet, kitsch art is popular among the public and with high market value. This is an interesting phenomenon because criticism usually is “associated with market conditions and capable of defying them” (Graw, 2009). Still, those criticism does not seem to affect the market value of kitsch art. Thus, this essay intends to seek an explanation for the existence of this dichotomy between high market value and heavy criticism of kitsch art.

As the scope of kitsch art is enormous, this essay only focuses on kitsch art by one kitsch artist, Thomas Kinkade. Kinkade was an American painter that was hated by many for a lot of reasons, in which the most prominent one is because of his kitsch art. Critics even mocked Kinkade by calling him the George W. Bush of art, in which Bush was widely recognized as one of America's worst presidents (Miller, 2012). Nevertheless, Kinkade's kitsch art is well-received by the market, and he generated 130 million USD in sales at his height in 2001 (Glaister, 2012). This evidence suggests that Kinkade is the best candidate for dissecting the essay's topic. By exploring the artworks made by Thomas Kinkade, this essay examines the reasons leading to the dichotomy between market value and criticisms of kitsch art.

This essay is organized into five major parts. This section highlights the importance of the topic by contemplating its background and motivation. The following section introduces Thomas Kinkade and his artworks, demonstrating the high market value and heavy criticism of Kinkade's artworks. After that, it presents the concept of *kitsch* and proves that Kinkade's art is an example of kitsch art. Then it investigates the reasons causing the high market value and heavy criticisms, respectively, and behind the dichotomy of these two areas. The final section concludes the essay by providing a summary addressing the research question.

## THOMAS KINKADE & HIS ARTWORKS

This section introduces the painter Thomas Kinkade and provides background on the high market value and heavy art criticisms of his artworks.

### *The Life of Thomas Kinkade*

Thomas Kinkade was an American painter known for his idyllic landscapes and cottages; he trademarked himself as the Painter of Light™ (Thomas Kinkade Studios, n.d.). In the book about the story of Kinkade, written by Kinkade himself and Rick Barnett back in 2003, there are detailed descriptions of his early life. Kinkade was born in California on January 19, 1958. Later in 1988, he wrote the book *The Artist's Guide to Sketching* with James Gurney. The book's success resulted in them working on the background art, like the one in Fig. 4, for the 1983 animation movie *Fire and Ice* for Ralph Bakshi Studios. After working on the movie, Kinkade began to make a living as a painter.



Fig. 4 An in-progress background art of *Fire and Ice* by Thomas Kinkade (Brekninger, 2012)

During his lifetime, Kinkade created and sold a lot of artworks. He was known for “[depicting] idyllic pastel scenes of gardens, bridges, lighthouses, and gazebos ornamented generously with luminous highlights, as well as cottages with windows glowing” in his artworks (Mason, 2012). On April 6, 2012, Kinkade passed away due to accidental alcohol and Valium overdoses (Duke, 2012). Yet, his legacy lives on after he was gone, as his company, Thomas Kinkade Studios, continues to produce artworks under Kinkade’s brand to this very day.

### ***Market Value of Kinkade’s Artworks***

Kinkade’s artworks were successful in art commercialization. At his height in 2001, Kinkade generated 130 million USD in sales (Glaister, 2012). According to his company website, Kinkade’s paints were hung in one in twenty American homes (Glaister, 2012). Furthermore, his company partnered with numerous organizations, including Hallmark Cards Inc., selling licensed products that contain Kinkade’s artworks in “more than 16,000 retail locations” (“Licensed partners,” n.d.).

### ***Criticism of Kinkade’s Artworks***

Art critics heavily criticize Kinkade’s artworks. In 1999, Decarlo in New York Times mentioned that Kinkade had “no champions in the high-art world.” In Kinkade’s 2001 New Yorker profile, Susan Orlean stated that his painters were “more of a wishful and inaccurate rendering of what the world looks like, as if painted by someone who hadn’t been outside in a long time.” (Gotthardt, 2018). In 2012, Christopher Knight, an art critic at Los Angeles Times, described Kinkade’s paintings as “schlocky” (Ng, 2012). Some critics even mocked Kinkade by calling him the George W. Bush of art, in which Bush was widely recognized as one of America’s worst presidents (Miller, 2012). In short, many art critics seem to hate Kinkade’s works.

## **KITSCH ART & KINKADE’S ARTWORKS**

This section first introduces the origin and features of *kitsch*, then establishes that Kinkade’s artworks fall under kitsch art.

### ***Origin and Features of Kitsch***

Although the linguistic origin of the term *kitsch* is ambiguous, scholars widely concurred with the idea that *kitsch* joined the German Language in the mid-nineteenth century (The University of Chicago, n.d.). *Kitsch* first used and became popular in the jargon of Munich painters and art dealers in the 1860s and 70s, referring to “cheap artistic stuff” (Călinescu & Călinescu, 1987). Later in the first decades of the twentieth century, this term gained international usage (Călinescu & Călinescu, 1987). Similar to its primary usage, this word carries a negative connotation. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), *kitsch* refers to “art, decorative objects, or design considered by many people to be ugly, without style, or false but enjoyed by other people, often because they are funny.”

Tomáš Kulka investigated kitsch in terms of visual art, music, and literature in his essay KITSCH (1988) and book Kitsch and Art (1994). His writings provided a neutral view of kitsch

as a concept. Kulka outlined the two basic facts about kitsch: “[kitsch] has an undeniable mass-appeal,” and “[kitsch] is considered (by the art-educated elite) bad.” In addition, he proposed three necessary conditions of kitsch: “kitsch depicts a subject which is generally considered beautiful or highly emotionally charged”, “the subject depicted by kitsch is instantly and effortlessly identifiable”, and “kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations related to the depicted subject.”

### ***From Kitsch Art to Kinkade’s Art***

With references to the section regarding the market value of and art criticisms about Kinkade’s artworks above, his artworks ideally fit the basic facts of *kitsch* identified by Kulka. Kinkade’s paintings are adored by the public, reflected by the demand for his artworks, and heavily criticized by art critics at the same time.

Many people, especially critics, labelled Kinkade as a kitschmeister, an artist who creates kitsch art (Baker, K, 2012). By comparing the conditions of *kitsch* identified by Kulka and the artworks produced by Kinkade, it is not hard to understand why. In general, Kinkade’s paintings look similar to the ones in Fig. 5 to 8. Aligning to Kulka’s first condition, Kinkade, in his words, “[got] rid of the ugly parts in his paintings” (Gillette, 2008) and portrayed the beauty of the scenery. Concerning the second condition of identifying the subject easily, viewers can recognize what Kinkade was drawing, such as cottages, without looking at the name of the artwork. Lastly, Kinkade’s artworks also match the third condition since his paintings do not affect the relationship between the viewers and the depicted subject.



*Fig. 5 Home for the Holidays by Kinkade  
(1991)*



*Fig. 6 Pine Cove Cottage by Kinkade  
(1996)*





Fig. 7 *Moonlight Cottage* by Kinkadee (2001)    Fig. 8 *Savannah Romance* by Kinkadee (2009)

## DISCUSSIONS

This section delves into the causes of the high market value and heavy art criticisms of Kinkadee's artworks. Then the reasons for these two features happening simultaneously are also investigated.

### *Reasons for the High Market Value of Kinkadee's Art*

There are two factors accounting for the high market value of Kinkadee's Art: the simple theme and effective branding strategies.

Regarding the theme of Kinkadee's art, its simplicity resulted in the rise of the popularity of his artworks. Kinkadee believed many people bought his paintings because of his "accessible, romantic themes inspired by his Christianity" (Mason, 2012). In the interview 60 Minutes in 2001, Kinkadee prided himself on the theme he depicted, saying, "Everyone can identify with a fragrant garden, with the beauty of a sunset, with the quiet of nature, with a warm and cosy cottage" (Rawlings, 2012). In other words, everyone could appreciate his artworks because the subjects he depicted were relatable and straightforward. Simplicity is also the pride for collectors of Kinkadee's work. Vivian Kanargelidis, who opened a Kinkadee Gallery with her husband in 2002, mentioned that Kinkadee's "paintings don't need a lot of interpretation, like some contemporary art does" (Mason, 2012). Another fan of Kinkadee, Rod DuBois, prefers buying Kinkadee's art over others that are a little challenging, like a Picasso print. He explained that "the problem [he] always has with Picassos is there's always an art critic trying to explain what it means," and he "[doesn't] need people to explain what it means." He preferred following his instinct on artwork rather than listening to critics about why he should like that particular artwork. Sometimes, people just want to relax when they appreciate an artwork, and understand the meaning behind artwork immediately by simply looking at it. This similar phenomenon can be concluded by art curator Ralph Rugoff (2004), which mentioned that the appeal of Kinkadee's artworks is "[the] kind of retreat, or refuge, from the challenges and demands of contemporary culture" they gave viewers. Thus, the simplicity of the themes in Kinkadee's artworks allows more people to appreciate them, resulting in higher demands and market value.

Another reason for the high market value is the effectiveness of Kinkadee's branding strategies. Kinkadee claimed, "Thomas Kinkadee is a multi-dimensional lifestyle brand, similar to Martha Stewart or Ralph Lauren" (Leung, 2001). Thus, his company had many licensing deals, including with Hallmark Cards Inc. ("Licensed partners," n.d.), distributing a wide range of products featuring Kinkadee's artworks. Kinkadee further elaborated on his plan by stating that a person "can put a Thomas Kinkadee couch beneath [their] Thomas Kinkadee painting. Next to the Thomas Kinkadee couch goes the Thomas Kinkadee end table. On top of that goes [their] collection of Thomas Kinkadee books, Thomas Kinkadee collectables, Thomas Kinkadee throw rugs. [They] can snuggle [their] Thomas Kinkadee teddy bear." (Leung, 2001). It can be seen that he intended to attract people to live inside the Kinkadee world, so that they would buy more products featuring Kinkadee's art. Furthermore, Kinkadee went as far as to brand himself to strengthen his brand, trademarking himself as the Painter of Light™. Kinkadee's strategy made people see Kinkadee's artworks as collectables instead of products, turning customers into loyal collectors and enhancing the market value of his art.

### ***Reasons for Heavy Criticisms of Kinkadee's Art***

Most heavy criticisms of Kinkadee's art focus on the lack of variations in themes and depth.

Critics considered Kinkadee's art lacked diversity because of the artwork's formulaic theme. Art critic Kenneth Baker from San Francisco Chronicle once mentioned that Kinkadee had a vocabulary similar to most painters, but "it's a vocabulary of formulas" (2012). Kinkadee had cycled many of his old themes and made a new one with slight differences. For example, when describing the pieces of Kinkadee's artworks in Fig. 9 and Fig. 10, they are cottages covered by snow in winter. The difference is so tiny that changing the naming of the artwork in Fig. 10, *Evening Glow*, to the one in Fig. 9 still makes sense. Therefore, if he had been more creative and used more types of themes, critics would probably be less belittling of Kinkadee.



*Fig. 9 Deer Creek Cottage (1995)*



*Fig. 10 Evening Glow by Kinkadee (1999)*

Regarding the lack of depth in Kinkadee's artworks, the criticisms were mainly from critics who believe that artists' responsibility is to challenge viewers' expectations. In the field of contemporary art, it is common to see artworks "[disengaged] from consumer culture, or [critiqued] institutions and belief systems" (Mason, 2012). As Kinkadee planned to make everyone enjoys and buys his artworks, his artworks were market-oriented, and his target was

achieving commercial success. Kinkade was not interested in challenging the viewers by making them reflect upon seeing his art. Thus, critics disapproved of Kinkade's decision, disliking Kinkade's art.

### ***Reasons for the Dichotomy between Market Value and Criticism of Kinkade's Art***

By comparing the factors of the high market value and heavy art criticisms of Kinkade's art, the main reason for this dichotomy is the differences in the preferences on the artworks' themes between art consumers and art critics. Most art consumers prefer art with themes that are easy to understand, while art critics prefer art with themes that challenge its viewers.

The above inference leads to another question: Why are the two parties' art tastes so distinct? I proposed that this significant difference is due to their level of art education. Consumers prefer easy-to-understand art because another kind of art is too difficult for them to comprehend, let alone appreciate. Even though the role of art critics is to help viewers perceive, interpret, and judge artworks, without much art background, it is sometimes hard for viewers to understand. Thus, people like DuBois mentioned above do not bother to understand critics' interpretations of challenging artworks like Picasso's and decide to follow their instinct when purchasing paintings. In other words, people with little to no art education background appreciate artworks with simple themes rather than complex themes. On the contrary, for art critics whose views are shaped by the art education system, they prefer artworks with more profound implications that have purposes other than surface-level appreciation. After learning different art concepts and dissecting many contemporary artworks, critics tend to value artworks with deeper meanings, namely not Kinkade's art. Hence, the art education background a person has impacted how they appreciate the theme of an artwork.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, by delving into one of the kitsch artists, Thomas Kinkade, this essay highlights the main reason leading to the dichotomy between market value and criticisms of kitsch art. The basic information of Thomas Kinkade was first introduced to call attention to his artworks' high market value and heavy criticism. Then the concept of kitsch is presented. After establishing that Kinkade's art falls into the category of kitsch art, the essay began the discussions on the factors impacting the market value and criticism of Kinkade's art. By comparing the common characteristics of factors in the two domains, the main reason accounting for the dichotomy between market value and criticism of Kinkade's artworks was identified.

The level of art education background impacts the market value and criticism of Kinkade's art. As extrapolated in the discussions section, people with lower art education tend to enjoy artworks with simple themes, like Kinkade's, purchasing them and enhancing their market value. On the other hand, a significant number of art critics prefer artworks with deeper meanings, challenging their viewers. Thus, critics criticized Kinkade's art for its simple themes, resulting in heavy art criticism.

As Kinkade is only one example of kitsch art, it is hard to prove that art education background is the sole reason for this contradiction of kitsch art. Thus, by dissecting Thomas Kinkade's artworks in this essay, we can conclude that the level of art education background is one of the primary reasons for the dichotomy between market value and criticism of kitsch art.



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