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Why Not Kinkade?

An Evaluation of the Conditions Effecting an Artist's Exclusion from Academic Criticism

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Art History

by

Kelly Drum Moran

December 2011

Dr. Scott M. Contreras-Koterbay, Chair

Dr. Vida J. Hull

Dr. Peter H. Pawlowicz

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ABSTRACT

Why Not Kinkade?

An Evaluation of the Conditions Effecting an Artist's Exclusion from Academic Criticism

by

Kelly Drum Moran

Though prevalent in non-academic debate, the subject of Thomas Kinkade and his artwork is discernibly absent from the realm of academic discourse. This paper is an investigation into that condition and the circumstances for its perpetuation. Central to the issue is Kinkade's art theory and practice, which establishes his coexistence in both the art and business domains, creating inherent contradictions. Further explication is revealed through an evaluation of the contemporary criticism of four posthumously canonized artists: William Blake, Phillip Otto Runge, Vincent van Gogh, and Henri Rousseau. Consistencies among them correlate to the treatment of Thomas Kinkade, suggesting a common art historical methodology in operation. An evaluation of these findings generates alternative perspectives for considering his artwork and presents the possibility for relevant, engaging research into concerns well beyond its aesthetic merit.

PREFACE

This project was conceived in late 2008, and research began during the Spring 2009 semester alongside my other coursework. It was my original intent to complete the work in Summer 2010 with the hopes of publishing the first comprehensive academic research on the artist Thomas Kinkade. However, that plan was deferred when my mother was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of breast cancer. As her primary caregiver, my focus redirected to the greatest challenge my family and I have ever faced.

In the selfless spirit typical of my mother, she continuously expressed her concern that her illness had interfered with the completion of my thesis. I reassured her with the promise to recommence my work as soon as she was well. Thankfully, against the odds, that day did eventually come. However, after months of accompanying her to chemotherapy, doctor visits, and surgeries; after watching her suffer physically and emotionally; and after facing my own greatest fears, I was forever changed. With that, the task of contemplating the nature of art historical methodology seemed insurmountable, if not trivial.

But thanks to her encouragement, as well as that of the rest of my family, I was able to rediscover my enthusiasm and resuscitate the project. After all, if my mother could survive cancer, surely I could finish this paper. In the months just prior to my defense, a book composed of several essays on Thomas Kinkade was published by Duke University Press.* While I regret that I was unable to present my research in

advance of this book, it supports my conclusion that the artist's work provides a trove of potential research possibilities for our field as well as other disciplines.

I would like to thank Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay for his continuous support, which was invaluable in the completion of this project, reminding me of the difference between "school life" and "real life." Thank you also to the members of my Advisory Committee and the Department of Art & Design for their patience in light of my unique circumstances. To all the doctors, nurses, and staff of the Knoxville Comprehensive Breast Center: my family and I cannot express the gratitude we feel every day for the expertise, kindness, and faith that gave my mother more time with those who love and depend on her daily in countless ways.

I dedicate this project to Pamela Stanley Drum, who represents all that I hope to achieve and become in this lifetime. I think of her daily along all the women who navigate the uncertainties and insecurities of being a survivor of breast cancer. I also remember those who are currently in the battle for their lives. And I mourn for the women who lost the fight and for their families who are forever affected by the irreplaceable void the absence has left behind.



* Boylan, Alexis L., ed. *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Conducting academic research that centers on the controversial artist-entrepreneur Thomas Kinkade is uniquely challenging in that the merit of the investigation itself is frequently met with skepticism from those consulted in the process. Subsequently, it is necessary to dispel both the immediate assumptions regarding what such a project will address and the associated visceral reactions to these suppositions prior to presenting discourse on the subject. In order to do so, let me begin by delineating what this researcher will *not* endeavor to accomplish.

First, this study will not iconographically evaluate the paintings of Thomas Kinkade in order to expose and analyze the symbols situated in them. His compositions are cleverly embedded with references to the virtues espoused by the artist: street numbers doubling as Bible passages, camouflaged “N’s” (for his wife Nanette) alluding to the rewards of matrimony, and cottages named for his daughters reinforcing the theme of family values. While these devices are amusing in a manner similar to a “Where’s Waldo?” sketch, they are superficial details in the realm of a comprehensive thesis project. Second, this research does not contain an exhaustive look at the artist’s influences – which he identifies predominantly as the Luminists – in order to analyze and measure his aesthetic development by these associations.¹ Any critical

¹ “His complex technique bears great kinship to a little known group of nineteenth century American painters known as the Luminists. As Kinkade puts it, ‘Like the Luminists, I strive for three visual aspects in my work: soft edges, a warm palette, and an overall sense of light.’” Art By Thomas Kinkade, under “Biography,” http://www.artbythomaskinkade.com/thomas_kinkade.html (accessed January 15, 2009).

comparison of his work with artistic movements or endeavors of the past only acts to solidify the familiar argument that reinventions of old styles become abysmally bankrupt of substance when removed from their cultural impetuses.² This position establishes the irrelevance of Kinkade's technical success or failure in adopting, developing, or adapting derivative stylistic conventions - most notably his technique of creating a light that "seem[s] to glow from within."³ Hence, the aesthetic merit of his compositions is irrelevant here as well. Lastly, this text will not catalog Thomas Kinkade's body of work alongside his biography in order to accommodate subsequent research; any future references to this thesis will not be in that regard. Indeed, this paper will not employ these or any other conventional art historical methods in an attempt to secure a position for Thomas Kinkade in the canon of art history.

The objective of this research is to investigate the circumstances surrounding Thomas Kinkade's exclusion from recognition by the art community and to identify conditions in critical methodology that can precipitate an artist's exclusion from critical favor. Currently, those wishing to discredit Kinkade's work must use the existing standards and critical process, which evolved out of academic institutions and are

² Discourse within the realm of Aesthetics addresses this position. Notably, G. W. F. Hegel deemed an artist necessarily part of his *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, derivations of this argument have been summoned in discussions of kitsch, a term associated with the work of Kinkade, which is assigned to any art borrowing stylistic conventions that had value within the age of their origination; on Hegel: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and John Hendrix *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit: From Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel* (New York: Lang, 2005), 11; on kitsch: Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 57.

³ This phrase is prevalent in descriptions of the artist, particularly by galleries selling his work. For example, see Artists of the South, under "Thomas Kinkade," http://www.artofthesouth.com/Thomas_Kinkade/Thomas_Kinkade_Bio.php (accessed February 15, 2011).

encumbered by limitations - particularly when applied to artwork created within the context of American capitalism. A more progressive evaluative approach to the work is necessary if critics are to effectively address artists operating in or in conjunction with free market societies.

Bringing Kinkade into the realm of academia is no small task, as the art world has effectively ostracized him through the application of traditional critical methodology.⁴ However, eschewing the artist has become increasingly challenging, as his marketing efforts and large audience have generated undeniable visibility. Kinkade defines himself as “America’s most collected living artist,” and the influence upon academia by the non-art community – which the assertion references – has become increasingly apparent.⁵ As one University of California professor stated, when asking his first-year

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, the art world and art community herein are defined according to the evolved version of George Dickie’s institutional definition of art, which excludes artwork created outside that institution. George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984); More specifically, based on the development of institutional theories of art and the artworld, per the summation of “The Artworld as Socio-Economic Network” as put forth by Professor Martin Irvine of Georgetown University: “The art world is structured as an interdependent network of social-economic actors who cooperate--often contentiously or unknowing--to enact and perpetuate the art world, while at the same time negotiating kinds and levels of cooperation in a mutually understood careerist and competitive context.” This encompasses a broad list of participants including anyone from art schools to collectors and critics. <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/visualarts/Institutional-theory-artworld.html> (accessed July 6, 2011).

⁵ Sources regarding Kinkade art ownership vary in the figures reported, but they consistently include buyers of products that cannot be conclusively linked to collectors associated with the art community as defined in the previous footnote. With regard to the numbers reported, Kinkade maintains: “[O]ne of our licensees alone has roughly ten million names that have purchased some form of Thomas Kinkade product.” By his measure, “Well over a billion dollars worth of art products sold over the last twenty-five years . . . transl[at]es into tens of millions of individual products.” Thomas Kinkade, interview by author, received May 29, 2009, Question #1. Interview transcript in Appendix.

art students to name a living artist, they always mention Thomas Kinkade.⁶ The frequency of this response is attributed to the naïveté of the students, which is implied by the specificity of the scholastic level of the students; the same is not reported of upperclassmen, and one can assume the recognition of Kinkade diminishes in response to the educational program.

Awareness of Kinkade by academics and non-academics alike is rationalized in other ways as well. The methodology commonly practiced among art historians that assigns categorical labels to work can be an effective tool for maneuvering within the broad field of post-Duchampian art. However, such terminology situates artists within defined categories that impose fixed limitations. In the case of Kinkade, the designation of “commercial” affixed to his profitable artwork obliquely discounts “Kinkade the artist.” The value-laden identifier carries a negative connotation, which casts art with this classification out of the realm of “fine” art, hence negating its validity as art in the broader sense.

The indeterminate meaning of “art” and “artist” generated by this strategy sustains the subjectivity necessary for academia to manipulate interpretation in support of desired outcomes. However, the ambiguity paradoxically creates a definitive void that commands a lexical distinction and compels the non-academic community to turn to semantics for direction. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines *art* as “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects” and

⁶ Statement by Professor Jeffrey Vallance, University of California, Los Angeles. Cited in Hunter Drohojowska-Philip, “Painted into a corner?” *LA Times* (April 4, 2004), special to the Times for CSU’s Grand Central Art Center under “Press,” http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press_2004_4_4.php (accessed April 25, 2009).

artist as “one who professes and practices an imaginative art.”⁷ When the populace relies on the semantic meaning of art, “Kinkade the artist” is validated in opposition to the elitist impulses of the high art world, making the task of exclusion more challenging within academia.

This problem is exacerbated when addressing artwork produced within the system of American capitalism. At the point of financial success, it ceases to be regarded as “art” and becomes - more specifically - an “art product.” Like other art classifications, demarcation between the two is neither finite nor consistent. A survey of Kinkade’s art theory and its development reveals that he exists simultaneously in both the business and art domains, and his work is a product of both. Each has its own frequently, even inherently, opposing system of valuation. The former uses complex economic and financial tables to rate worth that have evolved out of American capitalism; the latter’s European-rooted standards for judgment maintain a complicated relationship to money and obscure the free market’s role in the making of art. For artists who must navigate both paradigms for success, the dichotomy creates an impossibly contradictory critical context within which to operate.

In pursuit of direction that might move art historians toward a more equitable critical methodology, the research involved in the production of this thesis examined the conditions surrounding contemporary critical rejection of four artists who were later recognized for their contributions to art history. More specifically, it examined the language employed in that process. By isolating and analyzing the commonalities in the criticism of William Blake, Philip Otto Runge, Vincent van Gogh, and Henri Rousseau;

⁷ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art> and <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artist> (accessed May 12, 2011).

this investigation will identify alternative explications for Kinkade's exclusion. Through consideration of these possibilities, I endeavor to assuage some of the prejudicial obstacles that preclude his omission from academic discourse and, in doing so, offer academicians from multiple disciplines a viable - if not compelling - subject for scholarly discourse. Through the dialogue, a new paradigm for critical consideration of disregarded and discounted artists might emerge.

CHAPTER 2

THOMAS KINKADE: CAREER DEVELOPMENT

An examination of the career of artist and businessman Thomas Kinkade, the self-proclaimed and trademarked “Painter of Light,” underscores its development as an evolving and often contradictory relationship between these two epithets. His controversial approach to making art that is consciously constructed for its popular appeal incites contentious response from critics inside and outside the academically oriented art community. The mass-produced, sentimental images of cottages, gardens, and hometown streetscapes are characteristically dismissed as simply bad art.⁸ Still, Kinkade has managed over the years to build a small empire selling his nostalgic imagery, now in millions of homes worldwide; and this success makes it increasingly difficult to ignore his relevance within the history of art.⁹ Employing an alternative approach, he has established his legacy by adhering to a business model in the development of his artistic career – a strategy that has presented opportunities as well as challenges unique to this methodology.

⁸ Perhaps “bad art” is an understatement, considering assessments that conclude it is “so awful it must be seen to be believed.” Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2004), 124.

⁹ Sources vary in the numbers reported. Kinkade claims “one of our licensees alone has roughly ten million names that have purchased some form of Thomas Kinkade product.” According to him, “Well over a billion dollars worth of art products sold over the last twenty-five years . . . translat[ing] into tens of millions of individual products.” Thomas Kinkade, interview by author, #1, received May 29, 2009. Transcript in Appendix.

Art Theory and Aesthetic

As chronicled in Rick Barnett's biographical account of Thomas Kinkade's life, his career as an artist began rather unexceptionally.¹⁰ In his early years, he discovered a talent for representing the world he saw around him through an artistic medium. Like many artists, he developed those skills through practice, education, and mentoring. Simultaneously, and with equal vigor, Kinkade also cultivated his capacity for entrepreneurial success. Gradually, the importance he placed on the latter grew until it surpassed and eventually eclipsed his other pursuits. Kinkade's propensity for the business side of the art world facilitated his approach to art making and ultimately shaped his views regarding his role as an artist.¹¹

Kinkade's governing approach to making art can be loosely defined as "art for real people."¹² According to Kinkade, art is "not for the elite, but for the common people to enjoy. Art should be accessible to all..." and created so that the greater majority of the public can appreciate and enjoy it.¹⁴ He has stated numerous times, and with great conviction, that he categorically denounces the belief that art should be created as an expression of the self or that the "self" should be the "central operative motivator in the

¹⁰ Thomas Kinkade and Rick Barnett, *The Thomas Kinkade Story: A Twenty-Year Chronology of the Artist* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003).

¹¹ "The Early Years," in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 12-25. More specific references will be made in the following paragraphs, which examine these assertions in greater detail.

¹² Kinkade, interview by author, #1.

¹⁴ Thomas Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade: Twenty-Five Years of Light* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2008), 35-36.

creative process.”¹⁵ Instead, he prefers to “paint things people believe in. Things like home, family, and the beauty of nature.”¹⁷ In an interview with Cross Stitch Collection, a United Kingdom needlecraft magazine, he summarized his thoughts as follows:

“I always believe that the average working person is far more important than the most educated self-proclaimed art critic. I have had the good fortune to sell paintings to millions of people who had never bought a piece of art before, and I am proud that my paintings spark their emotions this strongly. Not only is this flattering, it reminds me that the real goal of art is to provide inspiration and pleasure to real people, not just an educated elite.”¹⁸

The popular response to his paintings translates into sales; and the sales validate his belief that “[s]omething that appeals to people may well be the highest measure of an artistic accomplishment.”²⁰ The capitalistic nature inherent in such an ideology parallels the objectives of a successful business plan whereby one endeavors to strengthen popularity among consumers in order to increase sales.²² As Chief Executive Officer Craig Fleming told Morley Safer in an interview for *60 Minutes*: “There’s [sic] over forty walls in the average American home. Tom says our job is to

¹⁵ Kinkade, interview by author, #4.

¹⁷ Thomas Kinkade’s Blog, entry posted March 30, 2009, <http://feeds2.feedburner.com/ThomasKinkadesBlog> (first accessed April 25, 2009). Entries are updated, moved, and deleted periodically online; author possesses PDF’s of original posts.

¹⁸ Thomas Kinkade’s Blog, entry dated July 26, 2009, <http://feeds2.feedburner.com/ThomasKinkadesBlog> (first accessed April 25, 2009).

²⁰ On how this translates into sales: Kinkade, interview by author, #1; Citation from Kinkade, interview by author, #6.

²² Refer to standard economics sources.

figure out how to populate every single wall in every single home in every single business throughout the world with his painting.”²³

An exploration into the early years of Thomas Kinkade’s life reveals the origins of his artistic development and financial motivation. However, evaluation of Kinkade’s biographical sources presents challenges imposed by his business-art relationship making it difficult to decipher fact from propaganda. There exists an abundance of documentation on Thomas Kinkade,²⁶ but what is available is authorized, published, or even written by him (or Thomas Kinkade Company).²⁷ In one way or another, what is distributed can be traced to either Kinkade himself or an affiliate of his company with some level of financial stake in the project. For example, the most inclusive biography to date - and the one most frequently cited in this chapter - is *The Thomas Kinkade Story: A 20-Year Chronology*.²⁸ It was co-authored by Thomas Kinkade and contains text written by Rick F. Barnett, who served as Executive Vice President of Retail Development for Thomas Kinkade Company at the time of its publication. According to Hachette Book Group, as the Executive Director of the Thomas Kinkade National Archive, he is currently considered to be the “world’s foremost authority on the artwork

²³ Thomas Kinkade, interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS, aired July 4, 2004, DVD, produced by Alden Bourne (New York: CBS Broadcasting, 2006).

²⁶ Thomas Kinkade boasted authorship or co-authorship of 120 books at a Prescott Signature Gallery promotional event, among other places, at which he spoke in March 2009.

²⁷ Distinguishing between Thomas Kinkade and Thomas Kinkade Company is difficult due to the fusion of the two entities as described throughout this paper. However, distinction will be made when critical to an argument.

²⁸ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*.

of Thomas Kinkade."²⁹ Many publications or information contained within source back to him or other affiliates of the company.³⁰ The implication is that published accounts of the artist and his work must be scrutinized for what is concealed as much as for what is revealed.

There are certain assertions about Kinkade's background that exist with consistency. William Thomas Kinkade, III, was born on January 19, 1958, in Sacramento, California. His parents moved to Latrobe, California when he was five. Shortly thereafter, his parents divorced, after which his mother moved him and his siblings to a trailer park in Placerville, California. Following additional moves from one apartment to another, the family eventually settled in a home of their own.³¹ Superimposed with these facts exist more subjective, emotive depictions of Kinkade's early years as wrought with financial hardship. The use of seemingly neutral phrases like "trailer park" subtly infers a lifestyle assessment. More directly summoning a sympathetic response, Kinkade asserts that due to his parent's divorce, it was necessary for him to supplement his family's single-parent income by working as a newspaper delivery boy. As recounted in the audio commentary accompanying *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage* (2008), he wistfully recalls peering in at the warmly lit homes on his paper route and imagining what it would be like to live in them, where he envisioned the existence of an ideal family life he had never known. It is this

²⁹ Rick Barnett, Hachette Book Group, under "authors," ([http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/authors_Rick-Barnett-\(1009013\).htm](http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/authors_Rick-Barnett-(1009013).htm), accessed most recently on October 10, 2009).

³⁰ Even Hachette book Group is now a partner of Thomas Kinkade Company (http://www.thomaskinkadecompany.com/general_pages.asp?id=20001).

³¹ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 14-15.

type of sentiment that Kinkade credits with his desire to create romantic, escapist imagery.³²

Considering this subject matter with more scrutiny, one could argue that a paper route was actually a very normal job for young teenage boys during the 1970s and that his common experience does not warrant an overly sympathetic response.

Nonetheless, it is this type of sentiment that is highlighted for the public in books, movies, and other types of media; which suggests an alternative motivation to reporting the biographical facts, such as the conscious construction of an empathetic character.

A quintessential example of this type of spin is evident in the dramatized film version of his life, aforementioned *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage* (2008), which is “based on the real events” surrounding his mother’s precarious financial situation one Christmas season. In the film’s commentary, Kinkade describes the pain of divorce and its impact – especially financially – on his life. Per his assessment, the era of the 1960s was a time when single-parent homes were rare. The rural nature of the community in which he grew up made the family unit even more imperative for survival. He stated, “Money was always in the foreground of my life. It was always a struggle to have enough money to pay the bills”³³ Whether this recollection is depicted accurately or it exists as part of an image-building strategy, money was nonetheless an impetus in the commercial direction of his artistic career.

Furthering this argument, it should be addressed that while an underprivileged childhood does not alone make Thomas Kinkade unique among artists, his reaction to

³² “Audio Commentary.” *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage*, DVD, directed by Michael Campus (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films, 2008).

³³ “Audio Commentary,” *Christmas Cottage*, DVD.

his situation does. For him, it resulted in the development of entrepreneurial drive that surpassed creative motivation. “Kinkade began to see his artistic talent as a tool for deliverance from the impoverished surroundings of a broken family and a provincial small town. ‘Art was my handle – a means of self-identity that gave me hope for the future despite the run-down neighborhood I lived in and the sense I had of the limited opportunities available to me.’³⁴ Like other capital-minded individuals who devise strategies to convert their skills into fortune, Kinkade recognized his artistic talent as a vehicle that might, with the right cultivation, liberate him financially.

Besides the financial motivators, there were other influential factors more traditionally associated with the development of an artist present during Kinkade’s youth that helped to shape the enterprising direction of his career. Glenn Wessels (1895-1982),³⁵ the artist whom Kinkade credits as his greatest mentor, moved to his Placerville neighborhood in 1974. The well known and successful Bay Area artist and professor set up a studio in a building on a lot adjacent to the family home.³⁶ Kinkade’s publications highlight the loftier effects of Wessels’s influence over Kinkade’s future such as “helping him blossom into an artist” and molding his very character by teaching him the high calling of an artist’s life and the devotion that demands; their association is even referenced as “divine providence.”³⁷

³⁴ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 16.

³⁵ Modern Art West, under “Glenn Wessels,” <http://www.modernartwest.com/artistswessels.htm> (accessed July 20, 2011).

³⁶ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 18; Thomas Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade: Twenty-five Years of Light* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2008), 16-17.

³⁷ Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade: Twenty-Five Years*, 16.

There were impacts of this mentor-student relationship beyond the basics of skill development that gravitated back to financial considerations. Glenn was an artist who had achieved a quantitative measure of success within his lifetime. Wessels lived in Paris during the 1920s and was one of the expatriates of that era. He was friends with such icons as Picasso, Braque, O'Keefe, Hemingway, and Ansel Adams.³⁸ He shared with young Kinkade stories of his associations with these great renowned artists, and he decorated the walls of his studio with photos documenting his extravagant past. Kinkade was inspired by his "well-traveled, rich life."³⁹ This relationship not only encouraged Kinkade's aspirations that a large life could exist for him outside of Placerville, but it would also have demonstrated that such goals were attainable through a career in art. As Kinkade has said, "Glenn did not teach me *how* to paint, he taught me something far more important; he taught me *why* to paint."⁴⁰ Once more, though obscured by more exalted explications, the lucrative pursuits underpinning this artist's direction are present.

The cinematic depiction of the relationship between the young artist and his mentor further reveals Kinkade's attitudes regarding the role of art in his life. As mentioned, *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage* (2008) recounts the desperate financial predicament of Mary Anne Kinkade. In brief, these factors threaten the loss of the Kinkade family home, which a young Thomas Kinkade tries to save by means of various endeavors. In the end, it is the gift of Glenn Wessels's final painting, entitled

³⁸ Glenn Wessels and Suzanne B. Riess, *Education of an Artist* (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, 1967); Lois Rather, *Glenn Wessels, Painter* (Oakland, CA: Rather Press Addenda, 1988).

³⁹ "Audio Commentary," *Christmas Cottage*, DVD.

⁴⁰ "A Conversation With Thomas Kinkade," *Christmas Cottage*, DVD.

The Last Leaf, which thwarts the foreclosure.⁴¹ When Kinkade suggests keeping it, Glenn Wessels's character - played by Peter O'Toole - tells him, "No you will not. You will take it to Sidney Marvin [his dealer], and you will sell it. The last Glen Weston should bring you enough to keep this cottage forever."⁴² It is only the financial value in the art that has merit; through the *sale* of the art their prayers would be answered. While there are concurrent themes of family, love, and warm holiday spirit, the Christmas miracle was a liquid asset. The Kinkadian theme of commercial value shrouded in sentiment emerges.

The real-life Wessels insisted that Kinkade receive formal training at the University of California at Berkeley, where Wessels himself served as an influential and well-respected professor.⁴³ Kinkade enrolled at Berkeley in the fall of 1976, but his interest in academia eventually waned as his desire to focus his efforts on painting escalated.⁴⁴ Consequently, he left Berkeley in 1978 to enroll in the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and develop these skills. There he encountered more like-minded students who were "focused on the goal of making a living from their talent."⁴⁵ He recalls "being torn between his desire to pursue his personal vision as an artist and

⁴¹ Thomas Kinkade, Thomas Kinkade Blog, entry posted February 28, 2009. The film version of Glenn Wessels is known as Glen Weston. According to Thomas Kinkade's weblog, the name was changed for legal reasons.

⁴² *Christmas Cottage*, DVD.

⁴³ On Kinkade's account of relationship: Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 20-21; on Wessels as professor: Wessels & Riess, *Education of an Artist*, 1967 and Rather, *Glenn Wessels, Painter*, 1988.

⁴⁴ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

the urge for commercial success.”⁴⁶ His affirmation is indicative of the contradiction that he, like many artists, encounters between creative and financial pursuits.

Despite any internal struggle, it was not long before Kinkade initiated his pursuit of that commercial success and prioritized it above his educational ambitions. After his second year at Art Center, Kinkade and his friend James Gurney traveled across America sketching. They returned home to compile the record into a book, and Kinkade resolved to leave school early to pursue the completion and eventual publication of the manuscript, later entitled *The Artist’s Guide to Sketching* (1982).⁴⁷ The book was met with success and is still used in some institutions as a teaching guide for beginner art students. Barely out of his teenage years, Kinkade was already exhibiting the indication that he possessed an entrepreneurial spirit and an affinity for the business side of the art world.

Further demonstrating these talents, Kinkade pursued his first significant commercial endeavor in 1983 - one that allowed him to maximize profitability for each successful, well-received image created. At the age of twenty-five, he and his wife Nanette used their savings to publish his first limited editions.⁴⁹ The printing process would allow Kinkade to reach larger numbers of buyers, because for each original he

⁴⁶ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 23.

⁴⁷ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 23; James Gurney and Thomas Kinkade, *The Artist’s Guide to Sketching*, 1982 (New York, N.Y.: Watson-Guption, 1988).

⁴⁹ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 29; These three prints were collectively called the Dawson Collection and were images of Yukon, Alaska, including *Dawson* (1984), *Moonlight on the Riverfront* (1985), and *Birth of a City* (1985, Published 1990) published under Thomas Kinkade Company (est. 1984).

painted, he could sell and circulate as many prints as he wished.⁵⁰ His motivation for doing so is not explicit; Kinkade consistently attributes the mass production of the art to his pious belief that he should share his gift with the world.⁵¹ Though he downplays the financial motivation behind his pursuits, he does declare that his prayers for success in this venture were answered when his “first few prints quickly *sold* [author’s italics] out.”⁵² He goes on in this statement to declare that this achievement allowed him “to see the business viability of fine art distribution.”⁵³

In a course of action common among artists who are attempting to build a career, Kinkade sought gallery representation.⁵⁴ In 1979, prior to leaving school, he achieved this goal; and he was included in exhibitions between 1982 and 1989 in both Biltmore Gallery in Los Angeles and Jones Gallery in La Jolla, California.⁵⁵ Though not

⁵⁰ Kinkade did not establish pre-set limits for the edition at the onset of publishing, a practice he continues to employ. Once retired, he retains the right to reopen printing. For example, in the case of *Dawson* (1984), printing of the image was reopened under the label “Kinkade Classics.” This print run, begun in 1999, has still not been closed.

⁵¹ This statement, one of Kinkade’s credos, is attributed to his mother. According to Kinkade, she told him, “God gives you a talent and that is his gift to you, but how you use that talent is your gift to God. And she said you must use what God has given you . . . to bless others.” *Part 2 - Thomas Kinkade Prescott Event*, YouTube video, 2009; Thomas Kinkade, interview by Reverend Anthony Harper of InterMountain Christian News, Boise, Idaho, 2009, at Tangle.com, http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=817dce783fd9a7e75fc3 (accessed March 23, 2009). (Video is currently posted at <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=J0CCJJNU#alertbar>.); Thomas Kinkade, interview by Larry King, Larry King Live, DATE, URL with access date.

⁵² Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 25.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Artists are advised to seek representation at galleries into which their style is suited, thus capitalizing on the established customer base and maximizing the possibility for acceptance. On the importance of finding a target audience, see Constance Smith, *Advanced Strategies for Marketing Art: Innovative Ways to Boost Your Art Career* (Nevada City, CA: ArtNetwork, 2011), p. 33.

⁵⁵ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 23, 31.

amassing a large following, the early work did generate enthusiasts, and he built a small client niche.⁵⁶ Kinkade produced and sold original landscape paintings during these years and attributes his inspiration to the Hudson River School painters among others.⁵⁷ The common subjects depicted included wildlife, mountain scenes, and commemorative images of old-world Native American life; which are antithetical to the present-day aesthetic associated with the work of Thomas Kinkade.⁵⁸

Differing from the insulated, reassuring sentimentality for which Kinkade's work is recognized, paintings such as *Range of Light* (1984) – with its shadowy sky casting darkness upon the valley below – convey the unpredictability of the natural world. Kinkade assigns his interest in these “early experiments” to the sublime painters of the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ *Yosemite Meadows* (1983) depicts a white, cliffy background; a middle ground of evergreens; and a strongly horizontal foreground composed of muted tones representing dead, wild grasses.⁶⁰ Within the scene, three men on horseback are barely discernable against the backdrop of the expansive natural world, conveying the

⁵⁶ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 23.

⁵⁷ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 23; He singles out Thomas Hill, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederick Church in the brochure accompanying *The Edge of Wilderness* (Published 2005). http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.document.web.tk.DocServlet?docAction=DocHome&docName=brochure_edgwil&docType=pdf&promoLink=pdf_brochure_edgwil

⁵⁸ Images in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*. *Range of Light* (1984), 33; Other examples include *Clearing Skies* (1984), 33 and *Days of Peace* (Painted mid-1980s, Published 1994), 42.

⁵⁹ Kinkade on sublime: “[*The Edge of Wilderness* (Published 2005)] reflects my early experiments with creating a sublime landscape style all my own,” Thomas Kinkade: Painter of Light, under “online gallery,” <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=Product&productId=203353&menuNdx=0> (accessed March 15, 2011).

⁶⁰ Image in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 22.

insignificance of man compared to the vastness of nature. Kinkade's objective in these early paintings harkens to the work of artists like J. M. W. Turner, who influenced the very Hudson River School painters to whom Kinkade attributes much of his inspiration.⁶¹

Kinkade's work was also affected by his exposure to "the early masters of the mythology of the American west."⁶² This is reflected in the art he exhibited in 1983 at Charles M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, as part of a two-person show. His fellow exhibitor, Michael Coleman continues to define himself as an American western artist, painting subjects akin to the early Kinkades.⁶³ The cover image selected for Coleman's recent publication is his print *Milk River - Blackfeet*, which features a landscape with teepees – an image frequently featured in Kinkade's early works, such as the aforementioned *Clearing Skies* (1984) and *Days of Peace* (Painted mid-1980s, Published 1994).⁶⁴ Though arguably competent, Kinkade's painting style did not separate him with distinction from other landscape and western artists.⁶⁵

⁶¹ J. M. W. Turner - painting two centuries prior to Thomas Kinkade - was coined "the painter of light," which is now attributed to and trademarked by Kinkade. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/content/ConConstituent/539>; John K. Howat, *American Paradise, The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987).

⁶² Cited in the brochure accompanying *The Edge of Wilderness* (Published 2005). http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.document.web.tk.DocServlet?docAction=DocHome&docName=brochure_edgwil&docType=pdf&promoLink=pdf_brochure_edgwil

⁶³ Kinkade's two-person show is mentioned on the Exhibition Announcement for his 1984 show at The Jones Gallery in La Jolla, CA. See Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 31; on Michael Coleman, Utah artist, see his website where he identifies himself as a "western artist." Coleman Studios, under "Home," <http://www.colemanart.com/Home.html>.

⁶⁴ These images, as well as *The Edge of Wilderness* (Original from between 1977 and 1987, Published 2005 as part of the Thomas Kinkade Archive Collection), feature tents and teepees in a sweeping landscape. Similarly, Michael Coleman's book cover for Peter Hassrick's *Under Eagles' Wings: The Art of Michael Coleman* (Jackson, Wyo: Judson C. Ball, 2009) features an image depicting Native American teepees taken from his *Milk River – Blackfeet* (limited edition of 100). Coleman Studios, under "Book," <http://www.colemanart.com/Home.html>.

In order to acquire greater success, by any measure, Kinkade would have needed to distinguish himself and his style.⁶⁶ Making an aesthetic transformation is a risky maneuver for an artist, as experimenting with new techniques can potentially stymie an emerging career.⁶⁷ Kinkade was undoubtedly aware of the necessity for stylistic consistency as evidenced by the 1984 exhibition card for his show at The Jones Gallery, which established for buyers his commitment to an aesthetic program: “Kinkade has for the past few years concentrated entirely on pursuing his vision as a landscape painter.” The predicament itself is not exclusive to Kinkade; any artist with an established client base and gallery relationship, but who wishes to explore new stylistic realms, faces the same challenges.⁶⁸ Unique to Kinkade, rather, is the stratagem by

⁶⁵ Besides Coleman, many other artists classified themselves within this genre, which pays homage to painters like Charles M. Russell and Frederic Remington. Many were arguably better at producing this imagery than Kinkade, but more importantly, there was competition in that market. Members of Cowboy Artists of America, founded in 1965, catalogs some of the most prominent among them. See Cowboy Artists of America, under “Objectives,” http://www.caamuseum.com/members/james_boren/deceased/index.html (accessed August 12, 2011).

⁶⁶ Constance Smith, *Advanced Strategies for Marketing Art: Innovative Ways to Boost Your Art Career* (Nevada City, CA: ArtNetwork, 2011).

⁶⁷ Per Kinkade, he “decided to experiment with this style but he did not want to tarnish his name and reputation as a romantic style painter.” Thomas Kinkade Online, under “Thomas Kinkade: Painter of Light,” <http://www.thomaskinkadeonline.com/about-thomas-kinkade> (accessed July 22, 2011).

⁶⁸ Stylistic transformations can undermine work’s authenticity and value by indicating to collectors that the artist has not yet procured a mature style, an important factor in securing gallery representation and client loyalty. According to the online website Artists Network, in preparation for marketing artwork to galleries, the second most important question to ask yourself as an artist prior to seeking gallery representation is “Have I developed a recognizable style?” (This is second only to “Is my art technically good?”) For more, see <http://www.artistsnetwork.com/articles/business-of-art/3-steps-to-find-the-right-art-gallery-representation> (accessed July 22, 2011); Having a consistent style is important to artists, because it is important to the galleries. See Edward Winklemann, *How to Start and Run a Commercial Art Gallery* (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2009); This protocol does not apply to artists who are already branded within the art market. See Donald N. Thompson, *The \$12*

which he circumvented this obstacle and devised a tactic to avoid the career pitfalls associated with an inconsistent style.

Robert Girrard

With the help of gallery owner George Gott and friend Terry Isbill, Kinkade created a brush name for himself and began painting what he deemed “plein air, Impressionism-inspired canvases” under the name Robert Girrard.⁶⁹ During the Girrard period (recognized as 1984 to early 1990),⁷⁰ his designated Girrard paintings varied from one another stylistically, and Kinkades created at the end of this duration assumed some of their more popular features. Through Kinkade’s Robert Girrard and Gott’s Cottage Gallery, the artist could assess market appeal via gallery feedback and sales, eventually modifying his Kinkadian style accordingly.⁷¹ By the end of this phase, Gott contends that the differentiation in popularity (as defined by sales) could be attributed

Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 14.

⁶⁹ All information regarding Robert Girrard cited here is taken from the FAQ page of www.girrard.com. Girrard.com is a division of Cottage Gallery, owned by George Goff with whom the Girrard paintings were originally shown and sold. Though Thomas Kinkade himself says he “cannot authenticate claims made on any given website,” he does not deny the claims. Kinkade, interview by author, #10; With regard to the nature of the paintings as plein air, Gott contends only 15% of them were actually so. The plein air “look” associated with Impressionism was more accurately what Kinkade tried to imitate through studio constructions. Girrard.com, under “FAQ,” <http://www.girrard.com/>.

⁷⁰ The close of the Girrard period is recognized as approximately when Thomas Kinkade and Ken Raasch entered into a partnership under the name Thomas Kinkade Company and then incorporated as Media Arts Group, Inc.

⁷¹ Assessment of the stylistic characteristics generating the greatest response in the experimental Girrard paintings, via gallery sales and feedback, would have informed and directed him in this pursuit. This assertion will be developed in the following paragraphs through an examination and comparison of the artwork assigned to Girrard and its impact on the artwork assigned to Kinkade.

only to which Kinkades – the “Girard” Kinkades or the “Kinkade” Kinkades - were better supplied.⁷² Exemplifying the stylistic merger that transpired, there are three prints from the end of the project that bear both the Robert Girard and the Thomas Kinkade signatures.⁷³ Behind the veil of his alter ego, Kinkade eliminated the risks involved in abandoning his recognized style, enabling him to pursue the identification and development of more distinctive and marketable directives in his work. The plan proved successful and facilitated Kinkade’s aesthetic transformation from epic landscapes and western genre to his signature “cottage” style.

There are currently sixty-nine known Robert Girard paintings and two drawings, completed between the years of 1984 and 1990, in which one can witness Thomas Kinkade’s transition from vast vistas with earthy, muted tones evoking melancholic nostalgia to the lighthearted, intimate subjects conveyed in sweet pastels.⁷⁴ The changes as viewed only through the Thomas Kinkade-designated paintings of the 1980s seem abrupt. Even his biographer, Rick Barnett, conspicuously evades discussion of this stylistic evolution in *The Thomas Kinkade Story: A 20-Year Chronology of the Artist*. His chapter dedicated to the years 1984-1989, called “The Early Works,” is allotted little more than a page - less than any other section of the

⁷² Robert Girard website, under “FAQs,” <http://www.girard.com/faq.php>.

⁷³ These are *An Evening Out* and *Boating Day*, which were signed after they were printed and bear original signatures; and *Paris Snowfall*, which bears digitized signatures. These were printed while George Gott and Thomas Kinkade were still affiliated through Cottage Editions, Ltd., and Gott continues to own the rights to this imagery. The prints were released in 1989, and the dates of the originals have not been confirmed beyond their situation within the Girard period.

⁷⁴ The number of paintings and their years of completion are per George Gott. Robert Girard website, under “FAQs,” <http://www.girard.com/faq.php>.

book.⁷⁵ He sums up the period ambiguously and curtly: “Nineteen eighty-four was the foundation of what became Kinkade’s legacy of early works. Evolving forward, 1989 would bring a new style, catapulting him to national fame.”⁷⁶ Despite the fact that these years are presumed critical to his stylistic development, minimal explication of how it transpired is offered. The changes that seem disconnected in the work of Thomas Kinkade evolve with greater clarity when considering the paintings of Robert Girrard. Fundamental Kinkadian characteristics first recognizable in the works of Robert Girrard are his signature color, brushwork, and lighting effects.

For example, the pleasant colors presently associated with the imagery of Thomas Kinkade appear in one of the confirmed earliest known Girrards entitled “Spring Meadows” (1985), which is composed of cheery blues and greens and is highlighted with daubs of reds and yellows.⁷⁷ In the Girrard entitled *Silver and Gold* – the only still life he has published - soft shades of yellows, pinks, blues, and greens are abundant. The color scheme was appropriate for the numerous boating and lake scenes belonging to the Girrard repertoire, such as *A Summer’s Morning*, *The Beach at Nice*, and *Sunday Afternoon*. One of the earliest water-themed images incorporating this palette is

⁷⁵ Identity was not revealed until 2001, nearly twenty years after his first Girrard was painted, when it had to be done because of contractual liability / full disclosure to MAGI.

⁷⁶ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 31; The Robert Girrard identity had been revealed by the time of publication of this book (2003). It was disclosed in approximately 2001 in conjunction with Media Arts Group, Inc. contractual agreements. However, it was not publicized.

⁷⁷ Image at <http://www.girrard.com/originals.php>; This is one of the few Kinkades with a published, accessible date of origination. Most available information only designates the date the image was released into print. This is particularly true of the Girrards, for which few images are available and even fewer dates; some of which were not published until well into the 1990’s, a decade or more beyond their creation dates. Every effort has been made within this research to use only examples of Girrards – as they correspond stylistically with Kinkades – where it can be conclusively determined that the Girrard predates the Kinkade.

Boating Day, in which people stroll in their fineries alongside a sea of sailboats.⁷⁸ The coloration of these Girrard pieces can be directly contrasted with Kinkades of the same year, such as the aforementioned “landscape-with-teepees” paintings. More subdued tones of grays, blues, and greens also make up other Kinkades like *Passing Storm*, *Northern Rockies* (1986) and *Range of Light* (1984).⁷⁹

The Kinkadian brushstroke, which the artist identifies as “broken color,”⁸⁰ is introduced in the Girrard works as well. Considering again *Silver and Gold*, the paint is applied with brushstrokes in erratic variations of lengths, widths, and thicknesses. Likewise, *Montmartre* experiments with choppy painting techniques forecasting the stippled color application of his current work and the technique he uses to add highlights to his prints.⁸¹ In contrast, the brushwork in the Kinkades of the 1980s – particularly as it is applied to the sky and background peaks such as in *Passing Storm*, *Northern Rockies* (1986) and *Range of Light* (1984) - is blended, making the hand of the artist less evident than in the Girrards.

The highlighting technique - incorporating the Girrardian brushwork with the daubing of bright yellow paint - is integral in the development of lighting contrasts that he now uses to create the warm glow of lampposts and interiors. Thomas Kinkade’s

⁷⁸ Image at <http://www.girrard.com/prints.php>.

⁷⁹ Images in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 32, 33.

⁸⁰ Thomas Kinkade Company website, under “Art Gallery: Robert Girrard,” <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=Category&menuNdx=0.18> (most recently accessed September 1, 2011).

⁸¹ Image at Thomas Kinkade Company website, under “Art Gallery: Robert Girrard,” <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=Product&productId=203297&menuNdx=0.18> (most recently accessed September 1, 2011).

exploration of lighting and its effects predates Robert Gurrard; however, the treatment is different in the works of the latter, which more closely relates to the present-day Kinkade work and signifies the stylistic evolution to its current end. Through Robert Gurrard, the application of dramatic lighting from ambiguous sources in a confined visual space evokes a more mysterious and intimate context. For example, *Montmartre*, attempts to use brightly contrasting patches of yellow to convey the presence of emanating interior light from beyond the shop awnings. The suggestion of light from residential windows also appears, and one lone streetlamp stands that anticipates the Kinkadian hallmarks to come. The lighting depicted in Kinkade paintings of the same period derives from natural sources. For example, in *Passing Storm, Northern Rockies* (1986), the sun bursts from openings in clouds to brighten the snow on the mountains below, and the natural shadows cast a contrasting light and dark upon them.⁸²

The evolution in the treatment of glowing lighting effects is even more revealing in the Gurrard streetscapes, not only in the application technique, but more particularly in the resultant mood. The alluring warmth is in opposition to many Kinkades created within this period, but it is commensurate with the Kinkades created at its close. The subject matter was part of the Kinkade repertoire already; Kinkade's first three published images, the Dawson series from 1985, were streetscapes.⁸³ Unlike the Gurrards, they incorporate lighting effects that differentiate between interior and exterior

⁸² Image in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 32.

⁸³ Images are accessible as follows: *Dawson* (1984): Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 28; *Moonlight on the Riverfront* (1985): Thomas Kinkade Signature Gallery of Massachusetts, under "Great Outdoors," <http://www.kinkadeartwork.net/page00000305.html> (accessed July 30, 2011); and *Birth of a City* (1985, Published 1990): Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 30.

space within the scene by contrasting warm yellows with dark, cool tones. The backgrounds against which his streetscapes are set contain the looming mountainous scenes indicative of his 1980s working style. The combined effect is oppressive. Unlike his current streetscapes, which are welcoming, these early streetscapes are alienating. Even his 1984 depiction of his own hometown - *Placerville, Main Street, 1916* (1984) - resonates with this bleakness.⁸⁴ The contrast in lighting conveyed the opposite effect that Kinkade currently strives to capture in his work.

The somber spirit is not perpetuated in all subsequent 1980s Kinkade streetscapes; but these images, while more sanguine, still fail to indicate the level of developmental experimentation that the Girrards represent and which eventually infiltrate Kinkade's work completely. For example, Kinkade's *San Francisco, 1909* (1985), like present-day Kinkades, incorporates a rosier palette and highlights shops, streetlights, and automobile headlights.⁸⁵ However, the viewer of this piece is disengaged, as the composition lacks drama in the manner of his recent works and as seen in Girrard's streetscapes. In Girrard's *Paris Twilight*, the composition becomes tighter, forcing the viewer into and confining him in the space. (Experimentation with dramatic perspective and its effects is very evident in his other Girrard Parisian streetscapes, as well.⁸⁶) Significantly, the warm glow of the shop interiors now enticingly beckons the viewer inside; rather than directing the viewer to retreat from the harsh

⁸⁴ Image in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 26.

⁸⁵ Image in Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 32. For an additional example of mid-1980s Kinkade streetscape, refer to *New York, Central Park South at Sixth Avenue* (1986), Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 35.

⁸⁶ *Winter's Dusk; Rainy Dusk, Paris; Morning on the Boulevard* (Est. 1984-1990).

weather by forcing him or her out of the elements, as is the case in his Dawson series images. While the setting remains rainy in *Paris Twilight*, its sunset-colored palette no longer conveys the dreariness of the other streetscapes.

Finally, one can witness the culmination of the Girrard experiment assimilated by Thomas Kinkade in his *Carmel, Ocean Avenue on a Rainy Afternoon* (1989). The composition is a street view of charming downtown Carmel nearing dusk at the end of an afternoon shower, referencing Girrard's *Paris Twilight*. Kinkade has fully incorporated the brighter, softer palette in conjunction with the dramatic lighting. Capitalizing on the effects of strong perspective investigated through Girrard's Parisian streetscapes, the picture plane here is moved even closer; enabling the painter to capture more specific details of the subjects and create vignettes with individual narratives, which maintain the viewer's interest. Images such as this reached buyers on a more personal level, than had his epic landscapes, by creating intimate associations.⁸⁷ The comforting, soft palette complemented by warm highlights analogs the tranquil images: neighbors chatting closely, couples huddled under umbrellas, a bicyclist and her dog ambling among the old-time cars, and an open-air fresh flower stand. The details invoke a cajoling sensibility that commands the viewer's engagement in the contrived reality.⁸⁸ This escapist quality appeals to, as Kinkade puts it, "the longing of the human heart for sanctuary."⁸⁹ From the images of Alaska to Carmel,

⁸⁷ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 51-52.

⁸⁸ Kinkade refers to his idyllic compositions as "something better than reality." Thomas Kinkade's Blog, entry dated April 6, 2009, <http://feeds2.feedburner.com/ThomasKinkadesBlog> (first accessed April 25, 2009).

⁸⁹ Thomas Kinkade's Blog, entry dated April 6, 2009, <http://feeds2.feedburner.com/ThomasKinkadesBlog> (accessed September 3, 2009); It certainly

Kinkade's discoveries through Girrard transformed his streetscapes - still common to his repertoire of imagery - from detached panoramas to intimate retreats.⁹⁰

An additional critical component of Kinkade's present work is first presented through Robert Girrard. This refers to Kinkade's signature style as it applied to his quintessential subject: the cottage. He attributes the conception of the image to a three-month family trip taken in 1990 to the English countryside, where he painted intimate country cottages as romanticized visions of home.⁹¹ However, the cottage – created using aspects of the Kinkadian technical program – appeared in Girrard's more than once prior to making its monumental debut in *Merritt's Cottage* (1990). Kinkade's acknowledgment of Girrard's influence, particularly in this realm, is inconclusive. He evades the implication in his commentary referencing the Girrard image entitled *The Cottage*, describing it as a "garden scene" that moves in "the direction of domesticity."⁹² He is more forthcoming – though not wholly committal - in his explication of the influence of Girrard's *A Winter's Cottage*, which clearly incorporates the theme as well as the techniques representative of his signature style. The snow-covered cottage, though depicted in shades of blues, conveys winter's tranquility rather than its harsh

captivates Kinkade's buyers in this manner. One of Kinkade's most avid collectors described the work. "I'll look at a painting of one of his cottages, and I'll see there's smoke coming out of the fireplace. And I'll begin to wonder who's inside there and what are they doing. Do they have hot chocolate? Is it a cold night? And they're enjoying themselves,' says Rod DuBois. 'So it kind of lets you think a little more about that scene and what you would be doing if you were actually there.'" *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001.

⁹⁰ See also *Moonlit Village* (1989) and *New York, Snow on Seventh Avenue, 1932* (1989) for additional examples of late-Girrard period Kinkade streetscapes.

⁹¹ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 52.

⁹² Thomas Kinkade Company website, under "Art Gallery: Robert Girrard," *The Cottage*, <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=Product&productId=201953&menuNdx=0.18> (accessed September 1, 2011).

elements. The warmly lit windows and street lamp create the glowing light fundamental to his current archetype. All elements combine to suggest the intimacy that Kinkade's work assumes at the end of the Girrard period, upon which his current formula for success relies. He reluctantly confesses: "I've come to recognize that *A Winter's Cottage* is one of my early examples of my Impressionist style [developed through Robert Girrard]. It may even be said that my Impressionist persona, Robert Girrard, made his first appearance in the English countryside."⁹³

Kinkade took advantage of the versatility afforded by the brush name and developed the current vocabulary visible in his work. When applied simultaneously, the technical changes effected a transition in the overall mood of Kinkade's paintings from the overpowering sublimity of the landscapes to the intimacy of streetscapes and country cottages. The nostalgia suggested in the early work and resolved in paintings like *Carmel, Ocean Avenue on a Rainy Afternoon* (1989), was summoned in the cottage imagery using the same devices. The first Kinkade-attributed cottages, *Merritt's Cottage* (1990) – credited with starting the "frenzy"⁹⁴ - *Chandler's Cottage* (1990), and *Hidden Cottage* (1990) are composed using soft pastels; and the benevolent light he spent years developing is incorporated as well. The cottage images now synonymous

⁹³ The inconsistency of this statement should be noted. In the first sentence he confirms Robert Girrard's influence, but he assigns to it limited recognition through his use of the term "Impressionist," which accredits stylistic influence only. In the second sentence, he discounts Girrard's influence on his present-day imagery by implying that Girrard brought his stylistic influence to the English countryside (where he was already painting cottages). This ignores the fact that he had painted cottages very similar to those, for which he is presently renown, prior to the trip that he reports consistently as the impetus for his current cottage industry. In fact, George Gott claims the first cottage Kinkaded ever painted was the logo for Cottage Gallery in Carmel, inspired by a postcard image and the quaint village homes. The Girrard painting called *The Cottage* is his earliest known published cottage image.

⁹⁴ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 52.

with Thomas Kinkade were met with immediate success, and he was inundated with requests for them from his galleries.⁹⁵ He had finally found his hook.

Robert Girrard was used to identify, develop, and eventually incorporate the techniques, which when combined, become the Kinkadian signature style. Simultaneously, the artist “recognized” as Thomas Kinkade continued to maintain the trajectory endorsed by his galleries, which is evidenced in the work produced and attributed to him during the 1980s. Exemplifying his achievement in this genre and his commitment to maintaining the consistent development of this program in his work, he was honored by National Parks System, which designated as its official print, *Yosemite Valley, Late Afternoon Light at Artist’s Point* (1989, Published 1992). The dual identity enabled him to pursue success in this realm as well, thus proving the strategem successful, and one he would willingly attempt again should it achieve his “creative ends.”⁹⁶

According to Gott, the active career of Robert Girrard ended in 1990 due to Kinkades changing commitments.¹⁰⁴ In the year prior, Kinkade partnered with Ken Raasch to create Lightpost Publishing and launched his plans to build the company that would ultimately make him “the most collected living artist” in the world.¹⁰⁵ The company

⁹⁵ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 52.

⁹⁶ Kinkade, interview, #10.

¹⁰⁴ Per George Gott, Kinkade explained that venture “would not leave him time to continue to paint ‘Girrard’ canvases, <http://www.girrard.com/faq.php>.

¹⁰⁵ This statement is consistently associated with Thomas Kinkade and operates as a tagline that accompanies his trademarked designation as the Painter of Light. When asked in an interview how this number is generated, Kinkade explains that his collector base is in excess of 15 million people; this appears to be based roughly on revenue as compared to product. This would include licensed Kinkade product, which by definition would also include items not necessarily created by Kinkade, but which are Kinkade-inspired

was devoted to the publication and distribution of Thomas Kinkade artwork.¹⁰⁶ The mass production of multiples expanded availability of his work and consequently gave him greater visibility. As his work pervaded galleries throughout America, his collector base grew; and as demand for the work expanded, so did his business. The reproduction and distribution process allowed him to offer the work at an affordable price point, which further broadened his potential client base by targeting middle-income Americans, the same populace for which his art was being created.

Incorporating Kinkade

In a short time, the new business grew exponentially. By 1990, the company had already exceeded expectations, demonstrating the potential for massive growth and profitability. That year, Kinkade and partner Ken Raasch incorporated their publishing business under the name Media Arts Group, Inc.¹¹⁵ The move to incorporate was likely motivated by a need to generate the capital necessary to achieve the expansion.¹¹⁶ Supporting this assumption, the business plan evolved to include the promotion of other artists in addition to Kinkade. This move - which transferred some of the focus away

(http://www.thomaskinkadecompany.com/general_pages.asp?id=20003); on partnership with Ken Raasch:

¹⁰⁶ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 25; Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade: Twenty-Five Years*, 34.

¹¹⁵ Susan B. Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*, <http://www.answers.com/topic/media-arts-group-inc> (accessed April 25, 2009).

¹¹⁶ The details of this business expansion, including what private equity may have been solicited and invested, are not available since the company had not yet gone public. They can only be speculative. Information not supported by documentation has been supported by consultation with Kathryn A. Drum, formerly of Goldman Sachs and currently the Assistant Director of the MBA program at King College, Bristol, TN.

from him - could only have been justified if it generated some other supplemental benefit for Kinkade, such as making venture more appealing to investors by limiting the risk involved in promoting only one artist.¹¹⁷ In 1994, the company acquired John Hines Studios and established licensing agreements with other well-known artists including illustrator Gary Patterson.¹¹⁸ The new company would be able to apply the lucrative developmental program constructed by Raasch and Kinkade to these artists. Kinkade demonstrated his business savvy in his ability to navigate complex business affairs, and in the process, his focus was strongly redirected from creation to enterprise.

The transformation that evolved in Kinkade's artwork is illuminated in the 1990 mission statement of Media Arts Group, Inc. It is as follows:

The mission of Media Arts Group, Inc. is to create the preeminent visual content management company in the world and to change the way people look at art through the development of life-affirming, emotionally uplifting images, and message driven products, rooted in traditional family values. With our successful business model, Media Arts Group, Inc. is positioned to be the dominant force in art publishing, home decor, and gift products in the coming century.¹²¹

In lieu of an artist statement describing the artist's creative pursuits, the issuance of a corporate mission statement defining instead how his artwork would advance the financial goals of the business is in itself revealing. Kinkade built his company and developed his artwork in accordance with a corporate strategy. The creative process was streamlined and transformed into a business plan. The principal aim in the

¹¹⁷ A more specific explanation of risk associated with one artist is addressed later, but for an immediate reference, see section 7 of SEC Report 2003.

¹¹⁸ Susan B. Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*, <http://www.answers.com/topic/media-arts-group-inc> (accessed April 25, 2009).

¹²¹ Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*.

development of imagery and the strategic management of that work is to appeal to the buying public.

Middle-class American consumers, comprising 40-60% of the country's population, devoured the sentimentality of his work.¹²² The formulaic essence of the cottage series was transferred to his other subjects, which he has been able to produce with prolificacy: lighthouses, gardens, seascapes, and so on.¹²³ He supplemented the already feel-good constructions with messages of love and family. For example, the letter "N" is hidden in his compositions as a tribute to his wife, Nanette, and references to his children are often included as well.¹²⁴ *Merritt's Cottage* (1990), the "first" cottage image, was named after his oldest daughter. The personalization of the images instilled a deeper connection between the viewer and the artist, solidifying that relationship. In

¹²² Scott McCormack, "Making People Feel Good About Themselves," *Forbes*, November 2, 1998, 222. Further, see demographics of his collectors. His brand catalog 2006 states his purchasers who are married with children have an average GHI of less than \$100K. It was this group responsible for the millions of dollars in sales he saw that year and the hundreds of millions in retail sales seen to date (2006). Though it is drastically changing, the 2006 estimated GHI of middle-income households was not more than \$60K by the 40% calculation – though approximately \$97K by the 60% calculation - according to <http://www.taxfoundation.org/research/show/22600.html> (accessed July 25, 2011). Either figure is consistent with Kinkade's middle income buyers.

¹²³ Each of these subjects has its own category at Thomas Kinkade Company's website, under "Art Gallery", <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=ArtHome> (accessed most recently September 4, 2011). The page for "lighthouses" displays fifteen images; the page for "gardens" has twenty-six; the page for "seascapes" has forty-eight. There are several other sections, and within each, the compositional format applied is apparent.

¹²⁴ *Part 3 - Thomas Kinkade Prescott Event*, YouTube video, time?, posted by thomaskinkadetv, March 26, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eI7EvpXT5B0&feature=related> (accessed April 5, 2009). Event was held on March 22, 2009; Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 51, 56-57.

marketing his artwork, he was marketing himself and the principle of family values, concerns often associated with the American middle class.¹²⁵

The value-based nature of Kinkade's artwork appeals to a crossover demographic of the middle-class American – the evangelical community.¹²⁶ His work has been able to attract this very large buying population as well. The two segments of the population are related by the values typically associated with them, and the fiscal characteristics of the groups frequently overlap as well.¹²⁷ Statistically, the center of conservative evangelical culture is comprised of white, middle-class Americans – Kinkade's client base – hence the shared marketing interests.¹²⁸ Numerous public sources exist that evaluate and comprehensively detail the earning potential in marketing that targets this group. One such profile referencing “behavioral marketing to maximize trust” of the evangelical Christians in the U.S. reports the following:

With 69.5 million American adults devoted to the Evangelical lifestyle, the current and still-growing societal and monetary clout of this cohort is impossible to ignore. In 2006, household income among Evangelicals represented 28% of the national total, or \$2.1 trillion, and products, services and marketing campaigns targeted to these consumers often have mainstream crossover appeal.

¹²⁵ Gerald Prante, writer for Tax Foundation of Washington D. C., suggests the term “middle-class” is “a useful term for discussing the values that Americans hold dear: working for a living, participating in community activities, helping the poor, succeeding in a competitive world without a government handout, etc., but less useful for objective discussion of incomes.” Tax Foundation website, under “Fiscal Facts,” entry dated September 11, 2007, <http://www.taxfoundation.org/research/show/22600.html> (accessed May 24, 2011).

¹²⁶ Heather Hendershot defines the “center of conservative evangelical culture as the white, middle-class Americans who can afford to buy ‘Christian lifestyle.’” Her book “examines the industrial history of evangelist media, the curious subtleties of the products themselves, and their success in the religious and secular marketplace.” Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago [u.a.]: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹²⁷ Refer again to Gerald Prante and Heather Hendershot in prior two footnotes.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Moreover, Evangelicals have market impact not only as individuals: Well over half of them belong to a church, and among conservatives in the segment, 62% attend a place of worship. Often headed by charismatic ministers and sometimes claiming membership in the thousands, Evangelical churches wield significant cultural, economic and political force, and they have marketing savvy to spare.¹²⁹

The importance of these statistics proved critical in the direction of Kinkade's own marketing tactics. A former Media Arts Group executive, Marcie Lowe, substantiates this assertion in statements made under oath in legal proceedings involving the company.¹³⁰ She contends that the new Signature Gallery owners – during their training at Thomas Kinkade University – were inundated with references to Christianity as an integral component of the work, the artist, and sales. Her testimony discloses Kinkade's alternative motivation, beyond his personal religious convictions, for adjoining his faith and his artwork and promoting that association in written statements, interviews, and when onstage at speaking engagements or promotional junkets.¹³¹ Concern over perceived duplicity in the work was implied in the so-called "Milli Vanilli memorandum," which allegedly circulated among the Media Arts Group employees.¹³² One ex-dealer stated, "They certainly used the Christian hook."¹³³

¹²⁹ ReportLinker, "Evangelical Christians in the U. S.: Lifestyle, Demographic and Marketing Trends, 2007," (<http://www.reportlinker.com/p062955/Evangelical-Christians-in-the-US-%20Lifestyle-Demographic-and-Marketing-Trends-2007.html>) (accessed April 5, 2009).

¹³⁰ Marcie Lowe, Deposition, *Media Arts Group v. Wittman, et al. v. Thomas Kinkade, et al.*, 2004. 0059-0061; Another executive, Anthony Thomopoulos, testified similarly. See Anthony Thomopoulos, Deposition, *Karen Hazlewood v. Media Arts Group, Inc.*, 145-146.

¹³¹ Parts 1, 2, and 3, *Thomas Kinkade Prescott Event*, YouTube video.

¹³² Marcie Lowe, Deposition, *Media Arts Group v. Wittman, et al. v. Thomas Kinkade, et al.*, 2004, 0053.

¹³³ Kim Christensen, "Painter Said to be Focus of FBI Probe," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2006, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/aug/29/business/fi-kinkade29> (accessed June 5, 2009).

Embellishing the spiritual nature of his work, Kinkade paints numbers into the compositions that reference specific scriptures. For example, 3:16 refers to John 3:16, which states, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” In an interview with Reverend Anthony Harper of Intermountain Christian News, he discusses the Biblical references as well as his faith, the inspiration of Jesus in his art, and God’s miracle of bringing Glenn Wessels into his life. He even attributes the light referenced in his copyrighted tagline, Painter of Light, to the light of God’s love. “The light that I try to paint is not just the visual light of perception, but also the light of God’s radiant love.”¹³⁵ Kinkade does not grant phone interviews, but not only did he make an exception in the case of Reverend Harper;¹³⁶ but he also permits audio of this conversation to be posted on Tangle.com, an online Christian community networking website. This anomaly illustrates the importance Kinkade places on the promotion of his work to this segment of the population.

Aside from sincere religiosity as motivation for his alliance with Tangle.com, the partnership offered other benefits revealed by the website. Tangle.com was formerly

¹³⁵ Thomas Kinkade, interview by Reverend Anthony Harper of InterMountain Christian News, Boise, Idaho, 2009, at Tangle.com, http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=817dce783fd9a7e75fc3 (accessed March 23, 2009). Video is currently posted at <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=J0CCJNU#alertbar>.

¹³⁶ This was the response I was given in a phone conversation with his assistant Denise Sanders in March 2009. Kinkade did offer to answer questions in written format. Now, however, the media does have an avenue for making interview requests by filling out a very detailed questionnaire requiring demographic and circulation information (http://www.thomaskinkadecompany.com/general_pages.asp?id=30005). To what degree they are granted is not forthcoming from Kinkade’s company.

known as the record-setting social networking site GodTube.com.¹³⁷ The site's very detailed "Advertise With Us" section is complete with audience demographics including household income, play-by-play high-profile media correspondence, and other information outlining their huge outreach potential. To advertisers, Tangle.com promises a consistent and loyal viewership in the millions.¹³⁸ Kinkade's posted interview offers him undeniable exposure to this large population of evangelical consumers, and his awareness of the existence and significance of this targeted demographic is indicated in his own marketing statistics that declare his "huge presence in the faith marketplace."¹³⁹ Kinkade reinforced his commitment to this marketing strategy when, in 2004, he promoted President Eric H. Halvorson to the position of Chief Executive Officer. Prior to Halvorson's association with Media Arts Group, Inc. and Thomas Kinkade Company, he served as Executive Vice President for Salem Communications Corporation, a Christian radio broadcaster and magazine publisher.¹⁴⁰ The appointment of a businessman with exemplar experience in the Christian market to

¹³⁷ Gina Soriel, "The Largest Content Safe, Family-Friendly Social Network Debuts & Offers 291 Million Americans a Powerful New Way to Connect for Support in These Tough Economic Times," *Reuters*, March 10, 2009, <http://bx.businessweek.com/online-video-advertising/view?url=http%3A%2F%2Fc.moreover.com%2Fclick%2Fhere.pl%3Fr1860809137%26f%3D9791> (accessed May 2009).

¹³⁸ Tangle.com, under "Advertise With Us," <http://tangle.zendesk.com/forums/63712/entries/55226> (accessed March 23, 2009).

¹³⁹ Thomas Kinkade Company Dealer Licensing Brochure 2009, Thomas Kinkade Company website. Downloadable in PDF format at http://www.thomaskinkadecompany.com/general_pages.asp?id=5000&promoLink=DealerOpHomeAd (accessed most recently on October 23, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ "Kinkade Completes Acquisition of Media Arts Group," *Art Business News*, March 3, 2004, at bNet under "Library" and "Arts," http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HMU/is_3_31/ai_114474004/ (accessed April 2, 2009).

the such an important position within the company supports the integral role of religion in Kinkade's marketing strategy.

The image-building campaign has been supported by Kinkade's numerous efforts to promote the visibility of his charitable contributions. For example, in 2006, Kinkade collaborated with Robert Goodwin and Pam Proctor on the book entitled *Points of Light: A Celebration of the American Spirit of Giving*.¹⁴² It is a collection of stories about individual Americans and the different ways they have contributed to society through volunteerism. Kinkade promoted the book during a Larry King Live interview.¹⁴³ His responses return numerous times to various accounts of his own personal acts of giving that, when considered collectively, resonate as self-promotion.¹⁴⁴ This tactic of altruistic posturing is revealed in his business plan, which specifically addresses charitable activities as part of the corporate citizen mission to "develop[ed] and strengthen[ed] key strategic relationships with charitable organizations."¹⁴⁵ These "strategic" relationships are promoted to solidify the image-based Kinkade art product.

¹⁴² Robert Goodwin, Thomas Kinkade, and Pam Proctor, *Points of Light: A Celebration of the American Spirit of Giving* (New York: Center Street, 2006).

¹⁴³ Thomas Kinkade, interview by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, July 1, 2006. For transcript, http://www.artofthesouth.com/Thomas_Kinkade/thomaskinkadetranscript.htm (accessed April 2, 2009).

¹⁴⁴ Kinkade touts within the first few sentences of the interview, ". . . from the very first print I ever published, I began raising money for charities." He then goes into several "for examples" including his New York City 9/11 print from which he donated money to Salvation Army, his daughter's Christmas cookies for the local senior center, community clean-ups, and states "it's more fun to go clean up the neighborhood park than it is to hop in your car and go to the neighborhood mall," the latter of which he condemns as "completely self-serving" (Kinkade, interview by Larry King, 2006). It should be mentioned that one of his local "completely self-serving" neighborhood malls contains a Thomas Kinkade Signature Gallery (Westfield Galleria in Roseville).

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Security and Exchange Commission, *Form 10-K Annual Report of Media Arts Group, Inc. for Year Ended December 31, 2002*, SEC File 0-24294, submitted by Merrill Corporation,

In the years just prior to taking the company public, Kinkade and his partners further developed their successful business model making it irresistible to future investors. Susan B. Culligan outlines these efforts in her contributing piece for Answers.com's company histories section. Media Arts Group, Inc. rolled out a chain of company-owned Thomas Kinkade galleries, the first of which opened for business in 1992 in Carmel, California. This and the twenty-six subsequent galleries of its type sold Thomas Kinkade reproductions on canvas. The mall-style "fine art" galleries were cohesive with Thomas Kinkade's business plan and approach to art-making as art for the populace. The development of this concept proved to be wildly successful for the company.¹⁴⁶ According to Thomas Kinkade, the carefully constructed showrooms are intended to remove the intimidating character of typical art galleries.¹⁴⁷ Per Kinkade, "You don't echo when you walk in. It's comfortable. There's a fireplace burning. There's a person sitting here who's not an art expert."¹⁴⁸ Here, art stylized to be accessible to the middle-American consumer is sold in an environment constructed to be equally accommodating. However, rather than using the universal scheme of a gift shop or poster store, the showrooms cleverly display the artwork in a format that harkens to the traditional gallery. In this context, the merchandise is elevated to the

2003, <http://www.secinfo.com/dVut2.2aWx.htm#1stPage> (accessed April 25, 2009), 4; This is also detailed in deposition testimony of Anthony Thomopoulos. Anthony Thomopoulos, Deposition, *Karen Hazlewood v. Media Arts Group, Inc.*, 2004, 145-146.

¹⁴⁶ Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*.

¹⁴⁷ W. M. Hunt of Hasted Hunt Gallery in New York describes the typical, unfriendly gallery as one where "You could be set on fire and no one would give you a glass of water." Cited by Donald N. Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28.

¹⁴⁸ *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001.

status of fine art by association, but the adaptations create a more inviting atmosphere to avoid intimidating the novice art buyer. Finally, it offers the buyer the opportunity to elevate his or her own status to “art collector” through a purchase.¹⁴⁹

In many cases, Kinkade collectors have never before purchased art, a point that Kinkade boasts routinely, and this works to his advantage.¹⁵⁰ Non-collectors with an interest in changing that status would be able to afford Kinkade’s product offerings, especially given that any single image is available in numerous sizes and formats at varying price points. There are many tiers of image formats available so that something exists for everyone.¹⁵¹ At the top level of pricing are the Master Editions, which are highlighted by Kinkade himself; at the bottom are the hand-numbered reproductions, with several other formats available in between.¹⁵² These distinctions would be vague or

¹⁴⁹ Art has long been deemed a symbol of elevated social status; its ownership a privilege once reserved for aristocracy. With the development of a middle-class, the bourgeois imitated aristocratic cultural conventions, such as art collecting. See Amy Wyngaard, *From Savage to Citizen: The Invention of the Peasant in the French Enlightenment*, (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 62, for the history of the process of status acquisition by the nouveau riche through art, a so-called “cultural currency;” Roger Fry discusses the concept in his digressions into notions of “snobbism.” See “A Moral Lecture, or Perhaps an Immoral One,” in Roger Eliot Fry and Craufurd D. W. Goodwin, *Art and the Market: Roger Fry on Commerce in Art* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 141; Economists have more recently addressed this phenomenon, deeming art a positional good, or one that proves a person’s wealth to the rest of the world. Because it is desirable and once only attainable by the rich, it is a status symbol for wealth. See Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (1976) and S. J. Solnick and D. Hemenway, “Is More Always Better? A Survey on Positional Concerns,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 37 (3), 1998, 373-383. The implications for art in this context have even been the basis for some contemporary definitions of kitsch. Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁰ Kinkade and Barnett, *Thomas Kinkade Story*, 51.

¹⁵¹ Marcie Lowe, Deposition for *Media Arts Group, Inc. v J.M. Wittman, Ltd., Brian Wittman, Andrea Wittman v. Thomas Kinkade, Lightpost Publishing, Inc., et al*, Monterey County Court Reporters, 74-181-02072-02-SAT, Monterey, CA, November 11, 2004, American Arbitration Association San Francisco, CA, 0055.

¹⁵² The Master Edition is the only category of print currently limited to a specific number, which is designated as no more than twenty. The other levels are issued at percentages of the total

indecipherable for novice art buyers, who would be unlikely to discern between the value of original paintings versus open-edition, hand-highlighted lithographs.¹⁵³ Further, there would be no incentive for the retailers to clarify the differences given that such a disclosure might result in the loss of a sale. When a buyer realizes there are literally thousands of some of the images, it becomes evident that the work is not unique; and this raises questions about the disparity in the pricing of a small print, which is hundreds of dollars more than a poster, but as abundant. Should they wish to do so, retailers themselves may have difficulty explaining the nature of the mediums, since Thomas Kinkade endeavors not to hire art experts to sell the work.¹⁵⁴ For those buyers who are more medium savvy, Kinkade justifies the prints as original fine art in that each one is highlighted with actual paint (though rarely by Thomas Kinkade himself), making it take on the physical characteristics of one-of-a-kind paintings.¹⁵⁵ Even the Chief Executive

number, which is obscure and undefined. For all levels and pricing, refer to any Kinkade Signature Gallery website. For example, Capitola Gallery in San Jose, CA, at <http://www.kinkadecapitola.com/pricelist.html> (accessed July 22, 2011).

¹⁵³ Not only are the editions open, but even those that are limited in number are still subject to being reopened at a later date. Refer to Kinkade's website for specific "reopened" editions. This business practice might generate immediate revenue, but is short-sighted in that it devalues the existing prints in circulation. It presents long-term challenges for the value of the product and the market's perception of that value.

¹⁵⁴ *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001. Describing the difference between the experience at his galleries versus traditional art galleries, Kinkade says: Our galleries are soft. You don't echo when you walk in. It's comfortable. There's a fireplace burning. There's a person sitting here who's not an art expert. We don't hire art experts. We hire people who love art and love people." Kinkade boasts his preference for novice dealers at his galleries.

¹⁵⁵ Master Editions, the prints Kinkade himself highlights, comprise only 1 to 20 out of the hundreds to thousands of each image edition. See any Signature Gallery's website for pricing and descriptions. For example, Capitola Gallery in San Jose, CA, at <http://www.kinkadecapitola.com/pricelist.html> (accessed July 22, 2011).

Officer for Thomas Kinkade Company maintains that as far as the company is concerned, they are all original Thomas Kinkades, no matter the medium.¹⁵⁶

Kinkade fused his art with manufacturing, integrated marketing, and further solidified his formula for financial success. This plan showed potential for unlimited and continued growth, and in 1995, the company went public and cashed out private investments in exchange for stockholder equity. An even greater expansion of the Thomas Kinkade empire was in the works, and the development of his business model quickly proved itself to the company's stockholders. In May of 1995, Media Arts Group was ranked an impressive third on the list of Business Week's 100 hot growth companies.¹⁵⁷ Per Culligan's statistics, the company posted record sales that had increased 217 percent over those of the previous year and reported net profits of \$3.8 million. It opened numerous company-owned galleries, and it initiated the popular Signature Gallery program that offers private ownership of Thomas Kinkade galleries.

The Signature Gallery program has been arguably the strongest and most lucrative contribution to the corporation's financial success. There are several levels of ownership available that allow a person to become an authorized Thomas Kinkade dealer. As described by the Dealer Licensing Brochure, the most expensive of these is the Gold Signature Gallery. At this level, owners must finance the build-out of their own gallery with Thomas Kinkade Company's approved wall covering, lighting, displays, and viewing room; and must sell nothing else in the space but Thomas Kinkade products. In order to open, the owner is required to pre-purchase \$50,000 of art at wholesale. The

¹⁵⁶ Statement by CEO Craig Fleiming. *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001.

¹⁵⁷ Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*.

start-up cost of a Gold Signature Gallery is estimated by Thomas Kinkade Company to be anywhere from \$80,000 to \$300,000.¹⁵⁸ Even more costly is the owner's contractual obligation to purchase an additional \$50,000 in artwork every year thereafter. With regard to estimated sales from such a venture, Thomas Kinkade Company can only say, "The amount of profit a dealer may earn depends on many factors such as location, size of gallery, investment in advertising, use of events, skills and experience of the dealer, merchandising, etc."¹⁶⁰

The benefits of the signature gallery program arrangement, for Thomas Kinkade Company, are tri-fold. First, there are virtually no start-up costs incurred by the company. There are employees whose responsibilities include the management of the program, but salary costs would be negligible by comparison to sales. This results in tremendous profit to loss ratios.¹⁶¹ Secondly, the annual required purchases by the Signature Galleries guarantee Thomas Kinkade Company a consistent and predictable income from this source. Thirdly, the owner - rather than the company - assumes the financial risk involved in the venture.¹⁶² By reassigning the financial risk to the dealer, the company is positioned to make a substantial profit. The creation of these low-risk, high-yield entities acts to increase visibility at someone else's expense. The

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Kinkade Company Dealer Licensing Brochure 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Kinkade Dealer Licensing Brochure 2009. There is evidence in the form of sworn testimony that suggests associates of the company offer(ed) dealers a formula based on dollars earned per square foot of showroom space (Lowe 2004, 0032). However, they offer(ed) no guarantees to the dealer, who assumes the responsibility for any profit or loss.

¹⁶¹ SEC, 10-K, 2003.

¹⁶² Marcie Lowe, Deposition, *Media Arts Group v. Wittman, et al. v. Thomas Kinkade, et al.*, 2004, 0014-1107. Thomas Kinkade Company offers some support for the first ninety days in terms of marketing advice, but beyond that, the owners are essentially on their own.

arrangement also enables Thomas Kinkade to monitor market response to his images through reported sales, a stratagem that demonstrated its efficacy earlier in his career. In fact, the company-owned flagship galleries were no longer necessary or profitable by comparison and were closed.¹⁶³

In 1998, Media Arts, Inc. began contracting with other well-known artists in order to open galleries that promoted not only Kinkade's work, but also launched new careers using the same marketing processes that had proven successful for Kinkade. Given the risks associated with promoting only one artist, Craig Fleming explained the program as "another significant step in our diversification efforts."¹⁶⁴ "It was apparent that Media Arts wanted to ensure that, should things break off in the future with Kinkade, the company had other prominent artists to merchandise."¹⁶⁵ The first of these artists was Howard Behrens, followed by Simon Bull, and ending with the 2001 addition of the marine-life artist, Robert Lyn Nelson. The so-called Masters of Light Gallery program was, however, short-lived and ended in only a few years.¹⁶⁶

In 2001, amidst the addition of artists to the Media Arts Group roster and the promotion of the Masters of Light Gallery program, Thomas Kinkade attempted a

¹⁶³ Marcie Lowe, Deposition, *Media Arts Group v. Wittman, et al. v. Thomas Kinkade, et al.*, 2004, 0069; SEC, *Form 10-K*, 2003.

¹⁶⁴ "Media Arts Launches Masters of Light Galleries," *Art Business News*, March 14, 2001, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_2001_March_15/ai_71722356/?tag=content;col1 (accessed April 27, 2009).

¹⁶⁵ Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*.

¹⁶⁶ Marcie Lowe, Deposition, *Media Arts Group v. Wittman, et al. v. Thomas Kinkade, et al.*, 2004, 0069. She explains the Masters of Light Gallery program was ended by Media Arts Group, Inc. within only a couple of years. The impetus is indeterminate, but company representatives attribute the decision to the downturn in the economy in early 2001 and following the 9/11 attacks.

takeover of the corporation. As the second largest shareholder and the Art Director for the company, he endeavored to take control of the company by purchasing all of the outstanding shares of common stock. Kinkade's offer of \$6.25 per share was considered by the company's Board of Directors, but it was determined to be an insufficient offer. Shortly thereafter Kinkade withdrew his proposal, "explaining his change of heart by saying that his decision was based on 'current economic uncertainties and the difficult lending environment.'"¹⁶⁷

Kinkade did not abandon his ambition to purchase the company back. Rather, he resolutely waited out the stockholders as economic conditions in the country declined. He made a new offer of \$4 per share, noticeably less than the offer that had been rejected in 2001, and it was accepted.¹⁶⁸ In 2003, he announced Thomas Kinkade Company's planned acquisition of Media Arts Group, Inc.¹⁶⁹ Kinkade has since been charged with deliberately driving down the price of the stock, which opened up a federal fraud investigation, but spokesmen for the company deny the allegations.¹⁷⁰ When questioned about his motivation for the acquisition, Kinkade states, "I didn't want to be part of a corporate machine" and declares that taking the company private "was another

¹⁶⁷ Culligan, "Media Arts Group, Inc.," *Answers.com*.

¹⁶⁸ Kinkade Completes Acquisition," *Art Business News*, March 3, 2004. "Media Arts Group Inc. announced in January that its stockholders approved and adopted an agreement and plan of merger among Media Arts Group, The Thomas Kinkade Company (formerly known as Main Street Acquisition Company Inc.), a Delaware corporation ("Mergerco") and artist Thomas Kinkade. As a result of the merger, the entire equity interest in Media Arts Group is now owned by Kinkade and his affiliates."

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Rachel Konrad, "Artist Thomas Kinkade Under FBI Investigation, Ex-Dealers Say," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 29, 2006, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2006/08/29/entertainment/e155230D41.DTL> (accessed April 25, 2009).

way of affirming that [his] life and work are one.”¹⁷¹ According to his contract with the corporation, he was required to create several new paintings every year, for which he was paid well; however, the agreement rescinded his rights to the new images as well as all former work, including the originals.¹⁷² Provided he planned to maintain his trajectory long term, an arrangement that relinquished ownership over his own images would not have maximized his personal earning potential. Once again, Kinkade engaged in complex corporate operations that demonstrated his proficiency in the business realm.

Amid and following the merger, Kinkade embarked with renewed vigor on numerous commercial projects. He signed contracts with organizations that came equipped with loyal client bases of their own including Nascar®, Indy®, Major League Baseball, and Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc.; for which he to created commemorative limited editions targeting their audiences.¹⁷³ “Celebrating with Disney®, Kinkade was invited to set up his easel on Disneyland’s® Main Street and capture the wonder of Sleeping Beauty Castle in honor of Disneyland’s 50th Anniversary. The following year,

¹⁷¹ Kinkade, interview with author, #11.

¹⁷² SEC, 10-K, 2003. Kinkade was contractually obligated to Media Arts Group, Inc. to, among other things, create fifty paintings per year. The images he created were then owned and controlled by the company. Under Part I, Item 1. Business, Section Products: “Under terms of the License [dated December 3, 1997], the Company has the complete, unencumbered, exclusive and perpetual rights to reproduce, adapt, manufacture, sub-license, publish, market, distribute, sell and display all art-based and non-art-based products and services associated with Mr. Kinkade and his ‘artwork.’ The ‘artwork’ includes...all original sketches, drawings, writings, paintings and other works of art created by Mr. Kinkade prior to December 1997 (including ‘archive’ images).

¹⁷³ For Nascar®: *Nascar Thunder: The 50th Running of Daytona 500* (2008); for Indy®: *Indy Excitement: 100 Years of Racing at Indianapolis Motor Speedway* (2009) and *A Century of Racing! The 100th Anniversary Indianapolis 500 Mile Race* (2011); for Major League Baseball: *Yankee Stadium* (2007), *Fenway Park* (2008), and *San Francisco Giants: It’s Our Time* (2011); and for Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc.: *Graceland 50th Anniversary* (2007).

“Thom made dreams come true for Disney and Kinkade fans alike” with the release of *A New Day at the Cinderella Castle*, celebrating Walt Disney World® Resort’s 35th Anniversary.¹⁷⁴

Capitalizing on the branding strategy, a licensing program consigned the artist - and the values associated with him - to a never-ending plethora of products. Headlines published by AllBusiness.com on the company’s direction read, “Media Arts Group, Inc. Unveils New Brand Strategy,” and “Thomas Kinkade Brand Continues at Licensing 2004.”¹⁷⁵ Central to the branding strategy, this move fused the artist and the product. Partnering with hundreds of companies, including big names like Hallmark, his images are on everything from screen savers to cemetery memorials and encompass nearly every aspect of the home furnishings market.¹⁷⁶ In some cases, the images are not even produced by Thomas Kinkade but are merely Kinkade-inspired, though still subject to approval of the company.¹⁷⁷ When asked about the effect of the brand on the

¹⁷⁴ The Art of Disney Parks, under “Artist Corner: Thomas Kinkade,” http://psc.disney.go.com/eventservices/artofdisneyparks/artistCorner/bio_thomas_kinkade.html (accessed July 30, 2011).

¹⁷⁵ “Media Arts Group, Inc. Unveils New Brand Strategy to Licensees at 2003 Thomas Kinkade Licensing Summit,” *Allbusiness.com*, June 4, 2003, <http://www.allbusiness.com/company-activities-management/product-management-branding/5795390-1.html> (accessed January 31, 2009); “Evolution of Thomas Kinkade Brand Continues at LICENSING 2004 International Show; Kolorful Kids Brand Launch,” *AllBusiness.com*, June 2, 2004, <http://www.allbusiness.com/legal/contracts-law-licensing-agreements/5612953-1.html> (accessed April 2, 2009).

¹⁷⁶ The licensees of Thomas Kinkade Company change. The most recent list of licensees is available at the Thomas Kinkade Company website (<http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.vendor.web.tk.VendorServlet?vendorAction=licenseeHome&promoLink=LicensingHomeLink>).

¹⁷⁷ See SEC, *10-K*, 2003. Part 1, Item 1. Business. Section Products, Licensed Products: “The Company licenses its artwork and trademarks to licensees that create, manufacture, market, distribute and sell products that feature the artwork and/or name of Thomas Kinkade. In some instances, the Company works directly with a licensee to create the product, and in other

person, he contends there is no difference between the two. He responds, “My life is seamless.”¹⁷⁸ Nowhere is this more evident than in his personal blog, in which the overwhelming majority of his responses lack any real human interaction. Instead, they resemble press releases promoting his current and upcoming projects.¹⁷⁹

Criticism

Thomas Kinkade’s rise in market popularity among the greater public was accompanied by a rise in criticism. Through most of his career, his artwork has been altogether ignored by scholars, art critics, and the art community as a whole.¹⁸⁰ The large number of sales and massive visibility of the work ultimately commanded

instances *the licensee will create the product independently* [author’s italics]. In either case, the Company has approval rights over all licensed products utilizing the artwork or trademarks. Although these products are not manufactured or sold by the Company, they are included as Company products for purposes of this discussion.”

The company’s website is specific in their use of the word “Kinkade-inspired” with regard to these licensed products. It reads:

“As part of our corporate strategy to transform Thomas Kinkade into an integrated lifestyle-based brand, The Thomas Kinkade Company has partnered with many quality companies who produce and distribute Thomas Kinkade-inspired products world wide,”

http://www.thomaskinkadecompany.com/general_pages.asp?id=20001 (accessed July 26, 2011). For example, Teleflora is a current partner offering floral arrangements with ceramic figurines, which are “Inspired by Thomas Kinkade,” one of which “features an outdoor scene of children sleigh riding.” Thomas Kinkade did not design the floral bouquet, but Thomas Kinkade Company presumably approved, as written in the above SEC report, the marketing of the product using the Kinkade name. Teleflora, under “Flowers in a Gift,”

<http://www.teleflora.com/flowers/bouquet/thomas-kinkades-sleigh-ride-bouquet-by-teleflora-291267p.asp> (accessed July 26, 2011).

¹⁷⁸ Kinkade, interview by author, #9.

¹⁷⁹ In virtually every entry of Kinkade’s blog, there is a reference to a commercial project on which he is working or a print that has just been released. Any responses to actual questions seem almost cut and pasted, as they are virtually identical reiterations of past statements (Thomas Kinkade Blog, <http://www.thomsblog.com/>).

¹⁸⁰ With regard to criticism, the art community herein continues to include constituents as described by Dickie’s institutional definitions. Refer to Introduction, footnote 4.

acknowledgment of the artist and his product by this sector.¹⁸¹ That acknowledgment has come mostly in the form of disparaging remarks, mockery, and derision aimed at its materialistic underpinnings. Kinkade has been crowned the “king of kitsch” and the work admonished a fusion of “chocolate box art with naked commerce.”¹⁸²

*Art Community: Non-Academic and Academic*¹⁸³

True discourse within the realm of academia is conspicuously absent, with criticism from this quarter expressed only when a response is pointedly solicited. Commentary is typically brief and dismissive, and the tone is often hostile. The objections most commonly espoused by the art community are negligible, which conveys the intrinsic belief that the work is unworthy of even negative recognition. Most sources of artistic critique are dispatched by popular publications and the blogisphere.¹⁸⁴ The controversial dual identity of Kinkade as a successful and independent artist-entrepreneur evokes criticism of his artwork precisely by its nature as commodity as well as because each artwork contributes to the process of commodification. Garnering the most attention in this realm are his use of formulaic

¹⁸² Cahal Milmo, “Kinkade, King of Kitsch, Coming to a Home Near You,” *The Independent*, May 5, 2001, under “Americas,” <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/kinkade-king-of-kitsch-coming-to--a-home-near-you-683724.html> (accessed October 28, 2009).

¹⁸³ Differentiating between academics and non-academics within the art community is not necessary, as the opinions of Kinkade’s work are typically consistent among the two groups when distinguishable. More pertinent is the consideration that buyers of Kinkade’s work are excluded from this group of critics. Until his work is legitimized by the art community, buyers of his art cannot be deemed members, per the parameters set forth by George Dickie and the derivatives of his theories as discussed.

¹⁸⁴ There is ample support for the viability of popular press as information sources due to the changing nature of communication. Given the absence of scholarly journals publishing on Kinkade, popular sources become critical references.

compositions, the commercial nature of his manufactured imagery, and his stylistic compliance with market demands. Long-established conventions invalidate the soundness of these generalizations.

The first of these common judgments relates to the contrived character of the artist's aesthetic, which art critics and educators regard with disdain. In an interview for 60 Minutes, Kenneth Baker of the San Francisco Chronicle describes Kinkade's work to Morley Safer in this way: 'He has a vocabulary, as most painters do. And it's a vocabulary of formulas, unfortunately. And he shuffles the deck every so often. Lighthouse, cottage, sea, ships, sky, and so on. Little bit of waves, so on, rocks. And you end up with this.'¹⁸⁵ Likewise, MetroActive contributor Christina Waters describes the compositions as "paint-by-number-style landscapes."¹⁸⁶ Members of the art community concur without exception.¹⁸⁷

Historical precedent endorses the application of formulas as a compositional tool. As a teaching method, students are encouraged to master the imitative process of accurately capturing the likeness of nature. Multitudes of instructional manuals currently in circulation strive to facilitate the perfection of technical aspects of drawing and painting, a practice consigned to the Western academies of art.¹⁸⁸ Today's art schools

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Kinkade, interview by Morley Safer, *60 Minutes*, CBS, aired July 4, 2004, DVD, produced by Alden Bourne (New York: CBS Broadcasting, 2006).

¹⁸⁶ Christina Waters, "Doubting Thomas," *Metro*, September 6-12, 2001, MetroActive, <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/09.06.01/cover/kinkade-0136.html> (accessed March 23, 2009).

¹⁸⁷ Even the supporters of Kinkade's work concede his compositions as formulaic constructions.

¹⁸⁸ For additional information, reference the following books on art academies. Malcolm Goldstein, *Landscape with Figures: A History of Art Dealing in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rafael Cardoso Denis, and Colin Trodd, *Art and the Academy*

have refined the tradition and replaced the academies' "fancy" drawings and antiquated knowledge" with more "productive skills."¹⁸⁹ In fact, it has recently been suggested that Kinkade's technique could be employed as a training device within the university system;¹⁹⁰ however, this proposal is likely to be rejected by instructors.¹⁹¹ As an aesthetic, the stylized representation that results from the use of formulaic composition has been revered in the artwork of ancient cultures. The repetition and formal constraints in ancient Egyptian art – standards and proportions ordering profile, semi-profile, and frontal view of human body - endured for thousands of years.¹⁹² More recently, Pop Artists like Rosenquist, Warhol, and Lichtenstein appropriated the visual language of formulas to critique the commodification of art.¹⁹³

in the Nineteenth Century (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, 1940 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973); Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971).

¹⁸⁹ Lane Relyea, "Art By Degrees," *Frieze* 49 (November-December 1999), under "Art Criticism," http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/art_by_degrees/ (accessed March 2011); Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁹⁰ Linda Weintraub, *In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Art*, Distributed Art Publishers, 2003.

¹⁹¹ Brian Curtis, "If You Open Your Mind Too Much Your Brain Will Fall Out: An Unapologetic Declaration of a Typical "Elitist" Attitude" (paper presented at Southeastern College Art Conference, Richmond, Virginia, October 22, 2010) http://www.brian-curtis.com/text/bc_fallout.html (accessed May 23, 2011). He argues against instruction of painting students using the "virulent Kitsch" of Kinkade's formulaic process, as endorsed by Linda Weintraub. See previous footnote.

Curtis does not want "the formulaic 'feel-good' visual Valium of Thomas Kinkade to infect [his] painting students because the task of teaching them to care, encouraging them to feel, [and] demonstrating the joy and satisfaction that comes from being constructive rather than deconstructive,..." is already "too challenging . . ."

¹⁹² Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, vol. II, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 23.

¹⁹³ Stokstad, *Art History*, 24.

Emphasis placed on the commercialism of Kinkade's art acts to distinguish it from what "real" artists do, and support for this argument is constructed with reference to his production methods. At his headquarters in California, Kinkade produces his art through an efficient use of hundreds of employees working in an assembly-like fashion, including the use of professional highlighters. These employees are trained to add strategically applied daubs of paint to the image transfers in order to mimic an original painting's physical characteristics, particularly surface texture.¹⁹⁴ The ones highlighted by Thomas Kinkade himself are much more expensive, but he and his representatives claim that regardless of who puts on the finishing touches, each is unique.¹⁹⁵ This assertion agitates members of the art community, who maintain that none of the art is original and disparage the employees as workers in a "treacle factory."¹⁹⁶

Criticism of this practice ignores the long-standing tradition endorsing studio assistants. It could not have been possible for artists working during periods of cultural explosion, like the Italian Renaissance and the years encompassing the Baroque, to

¹⁹⁴ The dissimulation of characteristic features that make a painting appear to be an original subverts the physical properties typically associated with originality. See originality in art as defined by George Dickie and Immanuel Kant. The latter deemed originality as the mark of genius. Christian Helmut Wenzel, *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁹⁵ "Tom paints every single painting that we produce,' says CEO [Craig] Fleming. 'It's still an original Kinkade as far as we're concerned.'" *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001.

¹⁹⁶ Milmo, "King of Kitsch," *The Independent*; Members of the art community - as we are considering them in this paper to be the arbiters of taste per the measures set forth by and developed by George Dickie - would reflexively discount Kinkade's work on the basis that it lacks in originality; or in the broader sense, that reproductions could not be presented as candidates for consideration as art by the art community. George Dickie, "What is Art?" in *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, George Dickie (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 19-52.

have met the demands of massive art campaigns without the help of others.¹⁹⁷ In some cases, artists only minimally contributed to execution of the masterpieces with which they were credited.¹⁹⁸ The custom was not disputed, as it was accepted as part of the program of apprenticeship. Further, the widely held consensus – endorsed and more fully developed by Giorgio Vasari – was that the source of artistic genius was bound to the *disegno interno*.¹⁹⁹ The person who envisaged the piece was its creator - not the assistant who executed the physical act and brought it to completion. Criticism of the customary practice as it relates to authenticity is a more recent invention.²⁰⁰ Like his

¹⁹⁷ See Andrew Ladis, Carolyn H. Wood, and William U. Eiland, *The Craft of Art: Originality and Industry in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Workshop* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), particularly the essay “The Artist’s Hand,” by Paul Barolsky, and “Instruction and Originality in Michelangelo’s Drawings,” by W. E. Wallace.

¹⁹⁸ Michael Cole and Mary Pardo, *Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Notably, the reliance on studio assistants by Rembrandt and Rubens is well-documented. For example, Rembrandt’s *Polish Rider* (1655), in the Frick, and *David and Saul* (1655-60), in the Hague, were executed all or in part by studio assistants. Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt’s Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1; Among others, Rubens’ Marie de’ Medici cycle (1622–1625) was executed by studio assistants. “For practical reasons [not unlike those of Kinkade], . . . Rubens organized his workshop to separate invention from much of the manual execution.” Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, in *Gale Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, under “Peter Paul Rubens,” <http://www.answers.com/topic/peter-paul-rubens#ixzz1VDXKcHz8> and Julius S. Held and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: A Critical Catalogue* (Princeton, N.J.: Published for the National Gallery of Art by Princeton University Press, 1980).

¹⁹⁹ As Vasari found, “it is easier to found the institution of artistic authorship on mind, imagination, *disegno*. Life drawing is a misunderstanding imbedded cameo-fashion inside the history of art.” Cited by Christopher S. Wood, “Afterlife of the Renaissance Studio,” in Cole, Michael, and Mary Pardo. *Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 69; also look to Vasari’s original text in Giorgio Vasari and George Anthony Bull, *The Lives of the Artists* (Harmondsworth, Eng: Penguin Books, 1996); on Vasari’s assertions on Renaissance and developed perception based on acceptance in Baroque, see Li and Li’s blog, under “Vasari and Disegno”, March 25, 2011, <http://bloglianli.blogspot.com/2011/03/vassari-and-disegno.html> (accessed August 30, 2011).

²⁰⁰ Refer to discourse regarding contemporary controversies over authorship of Rembrandts; on *Golden Helmet* (1650), see Alpers, *Rembrandt’s Enterprise*, 1988; on *Polish Rider* (1655), see Zdzisław Żygulski, Jr., “Further Battles for the “Lisowczyk” (Polish Rider) by Rembrandt,”

esteemed predecessors, Thomas Kinkade employs assistants in order to meet market demand. Combined with the technology of the printing process, his use of trained assistants can be considered an expansion of this accepted practice.

Sharpening the focus of the commercial argument, critics more specifically direct rebuke at Kinkade's *purpose* for the use of his assistants and the delegation of responsibilities. Differentiating Kinkade from the revered artists of the past, it is his presumed intention that is denigrated. Philosophical arguments about the role of artistic intention in defining art continue to be debated without consensus and are not disputed here.²⁰¹ Important to this discussion is the notion's usage as a means to discredit Kinkade's work on the basis that it is created for financial gain.²⁰² If financial motivation could be conceded a valid premise for repudiation, it would have to be applied universally; and there would be little disparity between Kinkade and, say, Michelangelo on this matter. Attempting to speculate on Michelangelo's material aspirations is conjectural, as one cannot know the heart of the deceased; but artists of renown like Michelangelo were compensated – and arguably well - for their efforts.²⁰³ Thus, justification for the rejection of Kinkade's work cannot be explained on this basis alone.

Artibus et Historiae 21, no. 41 (2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1483642> (accessed August 31, 2011).

²⁰¹ A comprehensive assessment of this debate can be found in the following: Mary Surrige, "Artistic Intention and Critical Prerogative," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18, no. 2 (1978): 137-154.

²⁰² Financial incentive is indisputably a factor in the production of Kinkade's art. Still, he contends, "It's not about money." Christina Waters, "Doubting Thomas," *Metro*; He has also stated that "he enjoys making money from his art." Kinkade, interview, #7; The seeming contradiction can be interpreted as Kinkade's own delineation between intentional motivation and secondary benefits, and the importance he relegates to them.

²⁰³ A recent study reveals the untold – if not deliberately disguised by his biographers - enormity of Michelangelo's wealth. The research was completed by Rab Hatfield, a professor at

More specifically, concern rests on the premise that Kinkade's aesthetic is fabricated as a product of the financial motivation. His willingness to modify his work according to buyer preference suggests a lack of integrity or authenticity.²⁰⁵ This is the sentiment lamented by Christina Waters, MetroActive contributor, who admonishes the lack of conviction he conveyed when opting to pursue a corporate strategy in the development of his style. She praises Kinkade's earlier work, suggesting that it is not a lack of talent preventing him from achieving critical success. Rather, admonishment of his work lies in his willingness to modify his style in order to appeal to the masses. Per Waters, he traded "aesthetic discovery" for "financial security" when he homogenized his style.²⁰⁶ Research presented previously indicates he was seeking a "hook," but Kinkade repeatedly defends his choice to develop an art style the populace appreciates. He suggests that any other approach to making art is disingenuous, and he defends his position by comparing his work to that of other professions, implying that theirs are the same standards to which he – and all artists – should be held. "The 'it's all about me'

Syracuse University's Florence branch. Rab Hatfield, *The Wealth of Michelangelo* (Rome: National Institute of Renaissance Studies, 2002). On the findings, Hatfield stated, "he wanted to 'demythicise' Michelangelo. Even if the facts were unpleasant to read, he said, surely it was 'best for us to know the truth.'"

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/1414836/Michelangelo-is-branded-a-multi-millionaire-miser.html>

²⁰⁵ Tessa DeCarlo, "Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?" *New York Times*, November 7, 1999, under "Arts & Leisure" section, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/07/arts/art-architecture-landscapes-by-the-carload-art-or-kitsch.html?pagewanted=2> (accessed April 25, 2009). She calls it "slickly commercial kitsch." On authenticity: refer again to prior footnotes.

²⁰⁶ Christina Waters, "Doubting Thomas," *Metro*. She referred to him a "painter of no small talent" and referred to his work from the 1980's as "ambitious, original oils."

attitude wouldn't work with doctors or politicians."²⁰⁷ They require the direction and approval of their supporters, as does he, in order to achieve success.

The aesthetic compromise associated with appealing to market demand is a historical phenomenon of the first "civilized" societies, where costly material endeavors required benefactors who determined the direction of the project. Religious patrons of the copiously financed Renaissance were especially heavy-handed in their partnerships with artists, causing tension even then; as Michelangelo is known to have had artistic opinions that differed from the Pope.²⁰⁸ The level of aesthetic influence upon masterpieces by patrons and the significance of that involvement remains a subject of debate.²⁰⁹ Regardless, the practice of soliciting and relying upon artistic patronage remains in tact, and it has been largely maintained by the gallery system. The artist commission – a direct form of artistic patronage - endures as an available option in nearly all reputable art galleries. The level of patron involvement is negotiated by the gallery, artist, and client. In the broader terms of the artist's stylistic development, gallery owners frequently massage the direction of developing artists to satisfy their client base. Thomas Kinkade has done the same through his own market analysis.

Considering the willingness of most artists to comply with market demand, disdain is more specifically directed at Kinkade's patrons, who are non-sanctioned

²⁰⁷ *Part 2 - Thomas Kinkade Prescott Event*, YouTube video.

²⁰⁸ Particularly renown is Michelangelo's artistic differences with Pope Julius II over the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Michelangelo deemed the work beneath him, as he considered himself a sculptor, not a painter. But under threat of excommunication, Michelangelo returned from Florence to complete the work. <http://www.rodneyohebsion.com/michelangelo.htm>

²⁰⁹ For discourse on the polemic implications for art, see F. W. Kent, Patricia Simons, and J. C. Eade, *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre Australia, 1987).

adjudicators of public taste – a privilege reserved for the traditional gallery clientele. His advocates are characterized condescendingly as “ordinary folk” and “philistines.”²¹¹ The Kinkade exhibition at California State University, Fullerton, was criticized by the more learned members of the Orange County art community who were posited to fear the validation of “shoddy aesthetic values among the uninitiated.”²¹² However, the streets housing galleries in art meccas like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles present a myriad of artists with varying styles marketing to client bases with diverse and contrasting aesthetic tastes. Further, there is an abundance of art buyers within the traditional gallery market who know arguably as little about the historical or intellectual significance of the art they are buying as do Kinkade’s clients.²¹³

Consideration of the appreciable rationalizations for Kinkade’s exclusion from art criticism exposes the oversimplification of these arguments. Negative appraisals of the artist’s aesthetic, the manufactured nature of the art product, and the financial success and motivation inherent to it are superficial assessments that are easily disputed by examples of historical precedence and conventional practice. Exploring the matter “Why not Kinkade?” necessitates a more comprehensive approach. An investigation, in

²¹¹ DeCarlo, “Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?” *New York Times*.

²¹² Clothier, “Thomas Kinkade,” *Art Scene*.

²¹³ Donald Thompson discusses the necessity of branded auction houses and galleries within the contemporary art market as a product of the insecurities of even the wealthiest, most seasoned art buyers. Thompson, *\$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, 2008; Artist Robert Genn of The Painter’s Keys Blog counsels colleagues on buyers by separating them into five categories (collector, investor, decorator, believer, moneyburner). Kinkade’s buyers qualify in at least three, but arguably fall into all five – just like “typical” art buyers. Robert Genn, The Painter’s Keys, posted Dec 10, 2004, <http://www.painterskeys.com/clickbacks/art-buyers.asp> (accessed May 25, 2011).

the following chapter, into the circumstances facilitating the critical exclusion of other artists will provide greater insight into the query.

CSUF Exhibition (Curated by Jeffrey Vallance) and Reviews

Though Kinkade contends that neither the judgment of art critics nor his inclusion in educated, high-brow art circles is of any consequence to him, he agreed in 2005 to be involved in a university gallery exhibition at Cal State University Fullerton in Santa Ana, California.²¹⁴ The director of Grand Central Art Center, Andrea Lee Harris, describes the space as “known for developing projects that challenge conventional notions and for providing a platform for . . . varied aspects of American culture.”²¹⁵ For the exhibition, artist and curator Jeffrey Vallance accumulated an abundance of Thomas Kinkade products and assembled them collectively. He declared that even Kinkade himself had never seen such a conglomeration of his own work.²¹⁶ Set with forest green walls and a fireplace, similar to his galleries, the installation included every Kinkade product that Vallance could amass from coasters and pepper shakers to bed coverings and furniture. A flower-trellised bridge like something from one of his paintings was constructed as an entrance to the space, and interactive vignettes - like a reading room, a bedroom, and even a chapel - were created to display the plethora of Kinkadian items.

²¹⁴ According to a press release on the event, when asked why he wanted to be involved in the project, Kinkade contradicts himself by stating, “It is flattering to think the paintings have cultural relevance at a level where critics might take it seriously” (http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press_2004_4_4.php).

²¹⁵ Vallance, *Kinkade: Heaven on Earth*, 7.

²¹⁶ Hunter Drohojowska-Philip, “Painted into a corner?” *LA Times*, April 4, 2004, http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press_2004_4_4.php (accessed April 25, 2009).

Vallance describes the exhibition as more than simply paintings on the wall; he aimed to create “Kinkadeland.”²¹⁷

Kinkade was proud of the exhibition, but reviews were almost entirely derogatory and cynical. One reviewer denounced Kinkade as the “Wal-Mart of Christ,” while an even wittier writer suggested that Kinkade made even the baby Jesus cry.²¹⁸ Robert Pincus, art critic for the San Diego Tribune, more even-handedly suggested that the exhibition had something for both Kinkade’s advocates and adversaries alike.²¹⁹ For those who enjoy the idyllic nature of the imagery, the show evoked sheer bliss; but for the people who love to ridicule the artwork of Thomas Kinkade, there was a plethora of ammunition.

Business Community

Kinkade’s business affiliation exposes him up to a broader set of critics: corporate shareholders, his own buying public, and the business partners and colleagues who have financial stake in his products. This is atypical of artists operating within the art establishment. The success of his artwork, by the business valuation system, relies on its profitability. Following a decrease in sales in 2004, representatives

²¹⁷ Drohojowska-Philip, “Painted into a corner?,” 2004.

²¹⁸ Sarah Jaffray, “The Wal-Mart of Christ,” *Cal State University Long Beach*, posted online April 30, 2004, <http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press.php> (accessed April 25, 2009); Rebecca Schoenkopf, “Out of the Temple: Kinkade Makes the Baby Jesus Cry,” *OC Weekly*, April 9-15, 2004, <http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press.php> (accessed April 25, 2009).

²¹⁹ Robert L. Pincus, “‘Heaven on Earth’ For Kinkade Fans: And For Haters of Kinkade, There’s ... ‘Heaven on Earth,’” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 16, 2004, http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040516/news_1a16pincus.html (accessed April 25, 2009).

for the Thomas Kinkade Company attributed losses to a broad decline in the limited-edition art business and the 9/11 attacks.²²⁰ Unsatisfied with this explanation, some disenchanted Thomas Kinkade Gallery owners sued Thomas Kinkade and his company, and they were eventually awarded financial restitution in the case.²²¹

With the litigation behind him, Kinkade now openly boasts his love of business, saying “. . . business is a hobby of mine. I enjoy making money with my art.”²²² He laments his greatest disappointment in business as the betrayal by people he trusted – a reference to the litigants in the legal cases.²²³ Fortunately for Thomas Kinkade, his entrepreneurial ambitions and tenacity were not diminished in the battle. He has continued to build a relationship with Disney and contracted with the corporation to create a series of images based on some of the most beloved stories produced by the company over the years.²²⁴ The affiliation is a true coup for the artist who has more

²²⁰ Kim Christensen, “Kinkade Defends Self But Says ‘Sorry,’” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2006, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/mar/09/business/fi-kinkade9?pg=1> (accessed June 5, 2009).

²²¹ The conditions and implications for the lawsuit will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

²²² Kinkade, interview by author, #7.

²²³ *Ibid*, #8.

²²⁴ He was contracted in 2008 to create twelve Disney images. Thus far, he has released the following ten Disney-related images: *The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast Falling in Love*, *Bambi's First Year*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Cinderella Wishes Upon A Dream*, *Tinker Bell And Peter Pan Fly To Neverland*, *Pinocchio Wishes Upon A Star*, *Snow White Discovers the Cottage*, *A New Day at the Cinderella Castle*, *Disneyland 50th Anniversary*. <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=SpecialList&categoryId=966&searchOrderBy=ByDate&searchType=all> (accessed July 26, 2011). Note: There are numerous discrepancies between Disney-designated images and the collections Kinkade's company markets them under on his website, which makes categorization ambiguous. For example, Kinkade's website suggests the first in his Disney

than once aligned himself with the great Walt Disney, saying he is the artist who has influenced him the most.²²⁵ Kinkade has also partnered with Warner Bros. to create images honoring classic films.²²⁶ Further expanding his reach and visibility, he launched a new show on Shop NBC selling his artwork and boasted that “the show received more responses than ever before, as an unprecedented number of customers called in to the Shop NBC studio in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, during the times I was on their special Collector’s Day Event.”²²⁷ Of all Kinkade’s profitable ventures, the most significant investment – and one never publicized – is his fortified warehouse of originals, a legacy with enormous monetary value by anyone’s measure.

Even the recession has not stifled Kinkade’s optimistic business outlook. He is confident that he is well positioned to come out on top. “We have always been very

Discoveries Collection as *The Princess and the Frog*, but it was first published in Nov 2009, after his first four Disney Dreams images were already in circulation. Further, he bundles his *Disneyland 50th Anniversary* and *A New Day at the Cinderella Castle* (Oct 2007) as part of his Disney package, but the two prints pre-date his contract with Disney to create the twelve images. It is unclear which are part of the overall contract or why there are Disney images in two separate collections (Disney Dreams and Disney Discoveries).

²²⁵ *60 Minutes*, interview by Morley Safer, 2001. “We view my work and my cultural identity in a way as an heir to the Walt Disney kind of tradition.” Kinkade also referenced Walt as the artist who has influenced him the most (Thomas Kinkade, Thomas Kinkade Weblog, entry posted July 23, 2009).

²²⁶ “Warner Bros. Consumer Products Enlists Renowned Artist Thomas Kinkade to Create Paintings Honoring the 70th Anniversary of Classic Studio Films,” Press Release, reuters.com, September 2, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/09/02/idUS194865+02-Sep-2010+BW20100902> (accessed July 26, 2011). Kinkade is partnering with the company to create commemorative images to be released in open and limited editions. The first Studio Masterworks will tribute *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, both trademarked by Turner Entertainment Company. The first released was *Dorothy Discovers the Emerald City* (August 2010). Four others in the Wizard of Oz Collection have since been released. See Thomas Kinkade Company website, under “Wizard of Oz,” <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/magi/servlet/com.asucon.ebiz.catalog.web.tk.CatalogServlet?catalogAction=SpecialList&categoryId=979&searchOrderBy=ByDate&searchType=all> to view them (accessed July 26, 2011).

²²⁷ Thomas Kinkade, Thomas Kinkade Blog, entry posted July 15, 2009.

responsive to market trends, and in a more challenging economic environment we have offered products that are more affordable to people.”²²⁸ When high-ticket items are less accessible due to diminished disposable income, Kinkade is positioned to fill the art needs of the people. Like a true entrepreneur, he sees opportunity in the face of economic hardship. “People need hope now more than ever.”²²⁹ Thomas Kinkade, the quintessential artist-businessman, is prepared to sell it to them.

²²⁸ Kinkade, interview by author, #13.

²²⁹ “Audio Commentary,” *Christmas Cottage*, DVD.

CHAPTER 3

EVALUATING CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM OF FOUR ARTISTS

Seeking indications in art historical criticism that dismisses artists such as Thomas Kinkade, research into the limited documented contemporary criticism of William Blake (1757-1827), Philip Otto Runge (1777-1810), Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), and Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) is revealing. Consistencies in the language of that criticism reflect a commonality in the treatment of the artists and their work. None could be categorized according to philosophies supporting the linear evolvement of art history.²³⁰ The singularity of the art was not conducive to the comparative approach - a necessary component of an evaluative methodology based on causality – because it cast it into a binary resulting in its negative appraisal and exclusion. This elucidates the limitations arising from the use of a comparative critical methodology. Moreover, the results reveal a pattern in the treatment of such non-conforming artists.

The first of the visible patterns - emerging over the lifetime of these artists - is the application of an existing critical nomenclature to either negate or substantiate artistic merit. The practice is evidenced through a comparative language, which inevitably casts them into an opposing binary – a concept that has been explored by historians across disciplines.²³¹ The second visible pattern in treatment occurs when the limitations of

²³⁰ Causality and linear theories of history based on the Western notion of time – and its relationship to art – have been addressed by philosophers from Aristotle to David Hume and G. W. F. Hegel, who concluded the necessary evolution of [art] history. Refer also to R. G. Collingwood and T. M. Knox, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

²³¹ Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist views and theories on binary oppositions were derived from and first applied in the realm of literary criticism. His theories have since been applied to the visual arts, having significant influence on Feminist theories. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and*

such an endeavor become overwhelming or inadequate. Critics commonly shift attention from the work to the artist, and the language then revolves around the psychology of the individual. Lastly, in an attempt to posthumously reconcile the short-sighted criticism, historians consistently access the more evolved critical language decades or even centuries later and reapply it to the past, creating the link that pulls the artist into the realm of the canon.

Application of Comparative Critical Methodology and Its Associated Language

William Blake

Having established himself as a capable engraver prior to subjecting his own designs and poetry to scrutiny, William Blake enjoyed greater public recognition than some of the other artists being considered here. This affords access to a larger quantity of contemporary commentary on his work and provides a solid foundation for the presentation of this research. Among the records are critical examples that, using a comparative critical methodology, reference his work using the existing classically based academic paradigm. His art was scrutinized within the context of the accepted programs of the age, and discourse was framed by its success or failure in adherence to these predetermined principles.

As the esteemed Blake scholar G. E. Bentley surmised in his tome of compiled references associated with the artist: "There was a general reluctance to consider Blake seriously at the most respected heights of art, as a designer or painter of large

Difference, Alan Bass trans. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1978); Nancy J. Holland, *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

'historical' pictures."²³² This is evident in the reviews that emphasize the characteristics in Blake's work that do not conform to the qualities associated with the highest ranking genre of painting. The two most notable of these is his lack of imitative adherence to the laws of natural world as well as the lack of clarity in the meaning or narrative message.

With regard to the former, many reviewers held passionate convictions regarding art's necessary reliance upon nature as its model. In his memoirs, Benjamin Heath Malkin deems "drawing from life always to have been hateful to him [Blake]."²³³ By critical account, the artist's deviation from this fundamental academic convention resulted in "absurdity."²³⁴ In response to *Blair's Grave* (1806-08), the *Antijacobin Review* of November 1808 declared "[t]he mind is shocked at the outrage done to nature and probability" and claimed that the spirits depicted in the composition

²³² G. E. Bentley, Jr., *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, The Critical Heritage Series (1975; repr., Boston: Kegan Paul, 1995), 4. Gerald Eades Bentley, Jr., emeritus professor of English at University of Toronto, edited the first edition of *Blake Records* and *Blake Records Supplement*, and is considered to be an expert on the life and work of William Blake. http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/f54_g_e_bentley/.

²³³ Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts of William Blake* (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), 24. Benjamin Heath Malkin (1769-1842) was the first other than Blake himself to publish Blake's lyrics, and until Alexander Gilchrist's biography, created the most visibility and provided the most prominent public awareness of Blake's poetry (though not listed in his obituary among his other publications; *The Gentleman's Magazine* 172, (1842), 211). Malkin is also known for his book commemorating the life of his son, entitled *A Father's Memoirs of His Child* (1806). G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Citation in Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts of William Blake* (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970), 24.

²³⁴ "Antijacobin Review" November 1808 and "Examiner" August 1808. In G. E. Bentley, *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, The Critical Heritage Series (1975; repr., Boston: Kegan Paul, 1995), 127.

fallaciously possessed the mortal characteristics of flesh and earthly dress.²³⁵ The August 7, 1808 publication of the *Examiner* concurred and pronounced that the effort of this implausible characterization of the soul was in vain: “Indeed to impose on the spectator fire for water would not have been more absurd. They have as close analogy to each other as soul and body.”²³⁶ Expectation of truth to nature was not limited to the spiritual but also applied to the physical. Lady Hesketh was willing to excuse many of the purported shortcomings of Blake’s work, but she drew the line at Blake’s distortion of reality in his depiction of children, stating, “the faces of his babies are not young, and this I cannot pardon!”²³⁷

²³⁵ On *Blair’s Grave* (1805-08): In October 1805, engraver and publisher Robert H. Cromek commissioned Blake to create forty illustrations representing passages from the Scottish writer Robert Blair’s poem, *The Grave* (Published 1743), (lyrics at http://classiclitt.about.com/od/blairrobert/a/aa_rblairgrave.htm). Cromek intended to choose a selection of the images to accompany a publication of the poem. “Blake’s designs illustrate both major incidences in the poem and brief passages. His selection of subjects and themes emphasizes immortality more than the death, the latter often presented as a passage to the former. Although Cromek very probably made the final selection of designs to publish, they tend to fall into contrastive pairs in format and theme—e.g., death of the wicked man/death of the good man, parting of the soul and body/reunion of the soul and body.” Illustrations available at Blake Archives: Works in the William Blake Archive, under “Commercial Book Illustrations,” *Robert Blair, The Grave* (c. 1806-08), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/copy.xq?copyid=butwba10.1.wc&java=yesde>; on the Antijacobin Review: the British publication was a monthly political periodical which grew out of the Anti-Jacobin sentiment of the French Revolution. Stuart Andrews, *The British Periodical Press and the French Revolution, 1789-99* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Original text in *Antijacobin Review and Magazine* 31, November 1808, 225-234, at Internet Archive, under “American Libraries,” <http://www.archive.org/stream/antijacobinrevi10conggoog#page/n233/mode/2up/search/the+grave> and secondary citation in Bentley, *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, 127-128. Ibid., 127-128.

²³⁶ On the *Examiner*: It was a British weekly periodical begun in 1808 by John and Leigh Hunt. It was intended to be devoted to the truth and originally refused paid advertisers. “History of The Examiner,” *The Critic*, est. Sept. to Dec. 1852. In John Holmes Agnew and W. H. Bidwell, eds, *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, vol. 27 (New-York and Philadelphia: Leavitt, Trow & Co, 1844), 230-234; Citation in Bentley, *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, 120.

²³⁷ *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, 4.

Perhaps the irreverence for classical conventions that reviewers found most insipid in Blake's work was its inscrutable ambiguity. On *Young's Night Thoughts* (1742-45), Allan Cunningham declared, "The crowning defect is obscurity."²³⁸ Others shared this viewpoint.²³⁹ On *Blair's Grave*, the Antijacobin Review complained, "We should not indeed, have been able to discover what all the subjects meant, were it not for an explanatory supplement of four pages."²⁴⁰ In attempting to critique *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794), Cunningham sticks to commentary on the subjects only, due to his lack of ability to decipher the meaning of the whole.²⁴¹ He

²³⁸ On Edward Young (1697-1765) and *Night Thoughts*: Young was an English poet who is best known for his poem *Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality* (1742-1745) – also known as *The Complaint, and the Consolation*. It was published in nine parts between 1742 and 1745, each part considered a "night," in which he laments the loss of his wife and others close to him and contemplates death. Blake was commissioned to illustrate the entire poem, but only four were published, as Young closed his printing business prior to completion. Regarding the designs, the Blake Archive states: "While Blake based his designs closely on the text, many of the images are based on personifications or metaphors in the poem. This approach tends to literalize what is only a figure of speech in the text, thereby confounding conventional distinctions between the literal and the metaphoric." This speaks to the confusion often surrounding Blake's imagery. William Blake Archive, under "Commercial Book Illustrations," Edward Young *Night Thoughts* (1797), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/work.xq?workid=bb515&java=no>; On Allan Cunningham (1784-1841): He was a writer and art critic best known for his *Lives of Eminent British Painters*, which included biographies of several artists. He has been called "The Scottish Vasari." Allan Cunningham, "William Blake." In Allan Cunningham and William Sharp, *Great English Painters: Selected Biographies from Allan Cunningham's "Lives of Eminent British Painters"* (London: W. Scott, 1886), 275-311; Quote from Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 166.

Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 166.

²³⁹ Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 166.

²⁴⁰ Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 125.

²⁴¹ "This lyric anthology evokes a predominantly pastoral world prior to the dualisms of adult consciousness. Human, natural, and divine states of being have yet to be separated. The child is the chief representative of this condition; other recurrent figures, such as the shepherd and lamb, point ultimately to the figure of Christ as the incarnation of the unity of innocence. In a few poems, the rhetoric, irony, and divided consciousness of experience begin to insinuate themselves into the landscape of innocence." There are fifty-four plates in a complete edition, *Songs of Innocence* have been separated out by collectors and dealers in some cases, due to

claims that *The First Book of Urizen* (1794) surpasses “all human comprehension,” and exasperates that “even his ‘wife could not tell’ what he meant...”²⁴² The preoccupation with understanding the work was developed and perpetuated in the academic system, and the criticism of Blake’s work evolved in response to the conditional expectations set forth. The lack of popularity of Blake’s work has been attributed almost solely to the fact that “no one... was found ready to lay out twenty-five guineas on a work which no one could have any hope of comprehending.”²⁴³

The necessity of judging artwork based on its clarity, especially with reference to a divine message, inherently condemns work of the so-called Romantic persuasion. This points to the eighteenth century struggle between concepts associated with a budding Romanticism versus the established Neoclassicism. Advocates of the latter would certainly have seen little merit in the work of Blake and deemed it “extravagant” – a consistently derogatory term when associated with artwork of this period – hence establishing another realm of terminology that evolved out of a polarity in the language

the complexity of the development of the series. See William Blake Archive, under “Illuminated Books,” *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/work.xq?workid=songsie&java=yes>.

²⁴² This is another example of the importance that Cunningham and other critics placed on deciphering specific narratives from the imagery. In this attempt to extract meaning, he questioned Blake’s wife, who being closest to Blake, would have presumably been able to explain the seemingly inexplicable. (She was even reported to have been the only one who knew Blake’s color formulas.) She went on in her reply to say supportively [in Cunningham’s words], “though she was sure they had a meaning, and a fine one.” Allan Cunningham and William Sharp, *Great English Painters: Selected Biographies from Allan Cunningham’s “Lives of Eminent British Painters”* (London: W. Scott, 1886), 275-311; Quote from Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 162; On *Urizen* (1794): Blake created twenty-eight plates that analog the biblical story of Genesis - using his own mythological characters - creating a “narrative of ultimate origins.” William Blake Archive, under “Illuminated Books,” *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/work.xq?workid=urizen&java=yes>;

²⁴³ Allan Cunningham on Blake’s longest and last epic poem, *Jerusalem* (1821); “Jerusalem,” in Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 185.

of academicism. Allan Cunningham sympathetically assessed Blake's work in this regard: "An overflow of imagination is a failing uncommon in this age, and has generally received of late little quarter from the critical portion of mankind." He continues, "Blake's misfortune was that of possessing this precious gift [imagination] in excess. His fancy overmastered him – until he at length confounded 'the mind's eye' with the corporeal organ, and dreamed himself out of the sympathies of actual life."²⁴⁴ Extravagant, mannered, imaginative: all are words that have negative connotations in this context as established by their antithesis to academic expectations for art.

In defense of Blake's work, comparative parallels were drawn by applying the established language in support of his aesthetic. Bentley noted that his advocates often analogued him with arguably the greatest resurrector of high classical, ancient art - Michelangelo.²⁴⁵ Of *Poetical Sketches* (1783), an illuminated collection of Blake's prose and poetry written between 1769 and 1777, John Thomas Smith said: "Some of the 'giant-forms' as he calls them, are mighty and grand, and if I were to compare them to the style of any preceding artist, Michel Angelo, Sir Joshua's favourite, would be the one."²⁴⁶ Regarding *On Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), Smith stated that the frontispiece was "an uncommonly fine specimen of art, and approaches almost to the sublimity of

²⁴⁴ Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 188.

²⁴⁵ "Introduction," in Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 3.

²⁴⁶ On John Thomas Smith (1766-1833): He was an engraver, painter, and the Keeper of Prints for the British Museum. He wrote an early biography of William Blake drawn from his own personal experiences with the artist. John J. McKendry, "Antiquity Smith," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20, no. 6 (Feb., 1962), 202-211, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3257917> (accessed September 11, 2011); Quote in Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 124.

Raffaello or Michelangelo.”²⁴⁷ Allan Cunningham proffered that many of the figures depicted by Blake in *Blair’s Grave* were “worthy of Michelangelo.”²⁴⁸ Isaac D’Israeli, the father of the novelist-prime minister, one of the few who appreciated the imaginative quality of the work, legitimizes it by comparing the “allegories’ ideal figures to the ‘arabesques of Raffaello.”²⁴⁹ Even the aforementioned hostile criticism expatiated by the Antijacobin Review on *Blair’s Grave* concludes that the classical aspects of the work were worthy:

In respect to the executive merits of the designs, there is considerable correctness and knowledge of form in the drawing of the various figures; the grouping is frequently pleasing, and the composition well arranged; some of them have even an aire of ancient art, which would not have disgraced the Roman school.²⁵⁰

For better or for worse, Blake’s work was associated with the existing paradigm as set forth by the instructional institutions, the pariahs of taste and propriety in art, and the language of criticism was a clear reflection of that notion.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 135-36; on *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794): One of Blake’s so-called Continental Prophecies, the cast of characters represent historical events and the opposing philosophies of the time. See William Blake Archive, under “Illuminated Books,” *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/work.xq?workid=europe&java=yes..>

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 167. Exemplifying his and the others’ similar statements, the figures in “Death of the Strong Wicked Man (Object 6, Bentley 435.5) are conveyed with a Michelangelo-esque anatomical sensibility of the male’s musculature - in both his frontal view and the view of his back (presumably his body as it separates from his soul). See image at Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, eds., William Blake Archives, Commercial Book Illustrations, *Robert Blair: The Grave* (c. 1805-1808), (<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb435.1.comdes.06&java=yes>) (accessed September 11, 2011).

²⁴⁹ Isaac D’Israeli (1766-1848) was a British writer and scholar, but he was best known for being the father of the Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). James Ogden, *Isaac D’Israeli* (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1969); Quote in Isaac D’Israeli, 1836, on “Blair’s Grave,” in Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 73.

²⁵⁰ Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 132.

Disdain for those that do not adhere to these principles as promoted by the academies is clear when critics go so far as to blame artistic deficiencies on obvious lack of training. Again, the very language used suggests the importance placed on the values purported by the art system, as the lack of compliance in the system was automatically equated with inadequacy. Blake's deficiencies are attributed to his designation as an "untutored proficient" by Malkin, and his work likened by the Antijacobin Review to "the rude scrawls that decorate the whig-wham of an untutored Indian..."²⁵¹ Some of his woodcuts, described as if done by a child, were redone to suit public taste and even printed with an apology.²⁵²

An additional component of contemporary criticism of Blake that is contradictory to the accepted norm of his age is revealed in the frequent reference to its lack of propriety – another classically derived societal, and consequently artistic, notion that flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The term "propriety" and similar signifiers connote the existence of an established set of rules by which one must abide and relates to the appropriate treatment of subjects in art, as well, as related to the moral and spiritual norms. By the nature of its opposing position, if art lacks propriety, it is deemed *in*-appropriate. In the case of Blake, his image of Christ in *Blair's*

²⁵¹ Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 27; Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 125. Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 125.

²⁵² Edward Calvert (1799-1883), an English painter and printmaker, on Blake's Virgil woodcuts (*Pastorals*, 1821): He writes to his son that the Blake woodcuts are "done as if by a child...several of them careless and incorrect." He writes this alongside complimenting the effecting humility. However, it should be noted that he made this assertion many years after the initial publication and apology. Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 139. *Ibid.*, somewhere between 132-142.

Grave, is “deficient in dignity.”²⁵³ Treatment of divine subjects were expected to be appropriately idealized – the convention perfected by the pagan Greeks and appropriated by the Renaissance Christians. Perhaps most disturbing to critics was the uncomfortable naturalism of the nudity, which was deemed too familiar. One of the founders of the *Examiner*, Robert Hunt, called Blake’s figures shown “in most indecent attitudes” bordering on “obscenity.”²⁵⁴ James Montgomery maintained that the figures in *Blair’s Grave* conveyed “not moral piety but shocking nudity” and went even further to declare the illustrations to be “hardly of such a nature as to render the book proper to lie on a parlour table for general inspection...”²⁵⁵

Contemporary critiques were generated by referencing the accepted aesthetic model evidenced in the classically-derived language, however inapplicable, in opposition to Blake’s artistic style. His work did not possess characteristics traditionally endorsed, but there was no other vocabulary to apply when using a comparative critical methodology to assess it. Thus he fell into complete obscurity after his death until Gilchrist’s biography shed new light on his work at a time when Romantic sensibilities in art had long been established as acceptable. As considered in the pages to follow, the academic climate decades later had fostered greater acceptance to this type of art – art with ennobling sentiment – and developed a vocabulary defining it through discourse. Reassessment of Blake’s work, long after his death, was constructed from an evolved and more tolerant critical climate.

²⁵³ “Antijacobin Review” November 1808 in Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 125.

²⁵⁴ Robert Hunt on “Blair’s Grave” in “*Examiner*” August 1808,, in Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 5.

²⁵⁵ Bentley, *Critical Heritage*, 118.

Philip Otto Runge

The exploration into contemporary criticism of a lesser-known artist, Philip Otto Runge, reveals similarities in the critical methodology in operation and in the conclusions drawn through its application. He was working in Germany, where cultural factors were different from William Blake's, but a comparable critical environment resulted in patterns of assessment and outcomes that are strikingly analogous. Like Blake, Runge was held to the standards of the existing paradigm, which perpetuated a reverence for Neoclassicism descending from French and English academic systems, along with trends toward Romanticism and Realism.²⁵⁶ Runge's work did not adhere to the established preconditions of such programs. Consequently, evaluated using a language derived from this system, it was cast into a negative state of polarity.

Critics were armed with the language of "isms" and the descriptives associated with them. References to Runge's work by drawing comparisons resulted, necessarily, in its dismissal. The singularity of Runge's work restricted its classification in one of the accepted categories for art, due to the limitations imposed by an associated terminology that was irrelevant in his case. The scholar Rudolf Bisanz wrote that Runge's art occupies "a unique position in history" with the artist opting to follow a "course . . . strangely his own."²⁵⁷ His compositions were unlike those of artists who constructed their work according to the endorsed artistic programs. Bisanz describes Runge's relationship to one such program, the so-called Munich Dusseldorf formula, which he describes as:

²⁵⁶ Rudolf M. Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Philipp Otto Runge; A Study in Nineteenth Century Art Theory and Iconography* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1970), 39.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

. . . equal parts classicism, realism, and ‘romanticism’ in great idyllic, historic, and religious productions, technical facility having been sufficient reason for other minor practitioners of the Metier to engulf the public with mass-produced ‘studio machines’ teeming with gods, nymphs, satyrs, medieval heroes, and occasional saints. The gulf between these productions . . . and that which Runge sought in art widened perceptively and in proportion to the progressive materialization of art and the mundane spirit from which it emanated.²⁵⁸

The impossibility of assigning Runge to Classicism, Realism, or Romanticism - indeed, the impossibility of readily defining his style in any associative fashion - left no position for him within the established critical paradigm.

Bisanz incorporates this concept – Runge’s eschewal of the sanctioned artistic styles - as part of his thesis on Runge in his book *German Romanticism and Philip Otto Runge: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Art Theory and Iconography*.²⁵⁹ He argues that a significant factor in the lack of contemporary criticism of Runge’s work, and the resulting obscurity of the artist, is its inability to fit into the “category of the Grand Tradition operative in French art.”²⁶⁰ The importance of this operative in Germany is evidenced by the existence of the Neoclassical art competition, *Weimarer Kunststreunde*, which Runge entered in 1801.²⁶¹ At this point in his career, he was still under the influence of his formal training and had not yet departed from the Neoclassical style

²⁵⁸ Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 22-23.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. Bisanz explains the lack of English translations of German texts and documents as a factor contributing to his obscurity. The condition still exists, so the translations of the limited criticism represented in this research depend largely on the accuracy of Bisanz’s interpretations.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

²⁶¹ The competition was held by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Swiss artist and art historian Johann Heinrich Meyer in an effort to “jump-start a German classicism of art...” Simon Richter, *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*. Rochester (NY: Camden House, 2005), 25. He attempted to comply with the tenets of German Neoclassicism in art and was an avid reader of Goethe’s *Propylaen* (a journal which advocated for the program); but he eventually abandoned it. Ibid., 15.

promoted by academies.²⁶² However, the critical rejection of his work indicates his inability (or refusal) to adhere with exactitude to the principles associated with this dominant trend in Western art.²⁶³

The pen, ink, and gouache drawing he submitted to the competition is entitled *Achill im Kampf mit dem Flussgott Skamandros* or *Achilles Battling the River God Scamandros* (1801).²⁶⁴ The subject was inspired by Homer's *Iliad* and depicts a fight between Achilles, on a killing rampage over the death of his friend Patroclus; and the river god Scamandros, who claims his waters are being choked by Achilles' plethora of victims.²⁶⁵ The imagery depicts appropriate classical subject matter – heroic figures from Greek mythology – but the style was not rendered to the critics' liking. It was rejected on the basis that "the drawing cannot be considered good, it is wrong and mannered. We advise the author to study antiquity and nature seriously and in the spirit of the ancients. But above all he needs to consider the works of the great masters of all times."²⁶⁶ The critic is likely referring to the imperfect proportions of the figures, the lack of detailed rendering or "unfinished" quality, and lack of clarity – all creating an imperfectly idealized composition. His next project received critical recognition, but

²⁶² Runge attended the art academy in Copenhagen from 1799-1801; at which time he abandoned his studies there, moved to Germany's art mecca of Dresden, and continued to educate himself outside of the academic system. Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 17-18.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19; image, 41.

²⁶⁵ Theoi Greek Mythology, Skamandros, under "Fight of Scamander, Achilles, and Hepaestus" (Homer, *Iliad*, 21), <http://www.theoi.com/Potamos/PotamosSkamandros.html> (accessed September 18, 2011).

²⁶⁶ From *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, von 1802, "Wimmarische Kunstausstellung von 1801," as translated and cited in Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 19.

Runge soon abandoned the academically rendered work for his own unique style, condemned for its singular qualities.²⁶⁷

His evolved style was rooted in German mysticism and inspired by his intense religiosity. It consisted of a newly created language of symbols, including color as well as form, that - though meant to be universal - was indecipherable beyond what was offered by the artist's own limited explanation.²⁶⁸ His *Times of Day* (1803) series was intended to convey the cycle of a day using these "hieroglyphics," and corresponded to the natural cycle of life.²⁶⁹ It consisted of four pen-and-ink drawings entitled *Morning*, *Noon*, *Evening*, and *Night*; from which he made plates for engravings. Goethe called the work's visual web of mystical iconography "'enough to drive one mad'" and a "'true labyrinth of dark relationships.'"²⁷⁰ Assessed by the standards of Neoclassicism and the clarity demanded of artwork, the comparison drawn between Runge's complex drawings and a "labyrinth" equated to a negative appraisal – one that was frustratingly encrypted in Goethe's judgment. Further, the lack of sufficient information regarding Runge's theories about art making contributed to this misunderstanding of the work.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ *Triumph of Amor* (1801-02) is an oil painting that depicts a frieze in relief sculpture. The compositional format and traditional, classically-inspired putti appeased the aesthetic tastes of the patronage superficially. But Runge was exploring, even if undetected by the viewer, his "hieroglyphic" language of mysticism. Albert Boime, *Art in the Age of Bonapartism: 1800-1815* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 443; Image in Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 42.

²⁶⁸ Bisanz, 35-36; Boime, 481-482.

²⁶⁹ Images for *Times of Day* in Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 42-46.

²⁷⁰ Statement by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Boime, *Art in Age of Bonapartism*, 480.

²⁷¹ Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 23.

As in the case of Blake, Runge's work was deemed obscure, and the classical tradition demanded clarity in art. Examination of the language of criticism advocated by the institution reveals a condition for acceptance that was inherently exclusionary when applied to artists like Runge, whose work did not correspond to it. The established paradigm for critical analysis of artwork perpetuated importance in "understanding" art, and work not adhering to this principle resulted in a "mannered" or "affected" visual style for its inability to communicate - a fundamental premise for art in its quest for consideration as a history painting. Runge's work remained in the public eye because it adhered to the visual, superficially recognizable style of Neoclassicism that appealed to the aesthetic penchant of the arbiters of taste. While some of his work appeared to adhere to these stylistic components, Runge was injecting his own experimental vocabulary, deviating from the accepted program and excluding him from critical favor.

Vincent van Gogh

A century after Blake and Runge, evaluation of the complex treatment of the work of Vincent van Gogh reveals that the comparative approach to criticism and its recognizable tendencies endured. As established, the comparative critical methodology incorporated the application of a nomenclature that evolved from the active trends in art and academia, which expanded in the late nineteenth century to include the avant-garde and its associated language. Still, its limitations precluded comprehensive evaluation, and van Gogh's work was dismissed or negated by its position opposing the qualities venerated by the art institution.

Consideration of van Gogh's critical climate – that of the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century – provides another dimension to the evaluation of historical critical methodology. This analysis, thus far, identifies the existence of a classically based paradigm for art criticism, which evolved out of the academic system. The establishment defined the requirements for artistic success and, consequently, acted as the arbiter of taste in the art world. By van Gogh's time, Western culture had been irrevocably altered by the conditions of modernity, and its influence on artistic development had resulted in an environment of conflicting ideologies. Rather than the prior unified directives dictated by the accepted institutions of art, there were multiple factions that vied for authority on the premise that the avant-garde needed to champion a new artistic direction – one which disavowed the academic art that had come to be representative of an essentially bankrupt culture.²⁷²

Nonetheless, it was still the infrastructure of “isms” – though decidedly more expansive – that continued to underpin art criticism. This is again evident in the language used to assess and ultimately dismiss the work of Vincent van Gogh. In the new culture of competing ideologies, numerous schools of thought emerged. Supporters of each attempted to affiliate van Gogh's work with their own. The singularity of van Gogh's work gave it a misunderstood ambiguity that enabled its appropriation by different factions, but only as long as the alliance garnered authority in the quickly evolving modern art world. Each critic, particularly in France, saw van Gogh

²⁷² Bourgeois society of the newly modernized world at the turn of the nineteenth century came to be deemed materialistic and vapid, and those institutions which reflected and perpetuated this culture (ie. the academic art system) were rejected by the avant-garde. See Paul Barlow, “Fear and Loathing of the Academic, or Just What Is It That Makes the Avant-Garde So Different, So Appealing,” in Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 15-32.

“through the prism of their own aesthetic standards and milieu” producing a “multiplicity of points of view.”²⁷³ He was positioned with Impressionists, naturalists, realists, romantics, symbolists, and synthetists as evidenced by the language - either directly in terms of the specific aesthetic programs or indirectly in terms of their associated visual characteristics.

Most of the avant-garde had come to deem the so-called Impressionists as the leaders in the charge to liberate art from the constraints of the academic system. A plethora of discourse emanated on the subject, and an associated vocabulary evolved in the process. Consequently, most of the criticism that sought to repudiate or accommodate the work of van Gogh did so with respect to the Impressionistic features of his work, such as the effects of light and atmosphere.²⁷⁴ For example, Johan de Meester (1860-1931) defended van Gogh’s use of un-naturalistic color representations, referring to work the artist did while in Provence, in these terms.²⁷⁵

“Certainly it will be a long time before the public believes in blue trees, but probably in the long run it will learn to see and also to understand that something can be green in itself but can become blue because of its setting, through the action of light and atmosphere.”²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Carol M. Zemel, *The Formation of a Legend: Van Gogh Criticism, 1890-1920*, Studies in Fine Arts: Criticism 10 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 76-78. Duret, Fontainas, Mirbeau, LeBlonds, etc. Give specific accounts here.

²⁷⁴ See Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, for reference: Johan de Meester on Van Gogh, 16; Veth on “impressions” in work, 24; Duret, see preceding footnote; Julius Meier-Graefe, the first German to own a Van Gogh, 109-110; Linked to Corot, Monticelli, Monet, 68+?.

²⁷⁵ Johan de Meester was an art critic writing for the Dutch paper *Algemeen Handelsblad* on the Paris art scene. He later became the art editor of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (1860--1<http://www.vggallery.com/misc/archives/bookseller.htm> (accessed September 20, 2011). He may have been referring to any one of van Gogh’s Provence paintings, many of which have “blue trees,” viewed in memoriam in Theo van Gogh’s apartment in December 1890, Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, FN37, 160.

²⁷⁶ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 16.

Considering van Gogh's own remarks regarding his Provence paintings, de Meester's comment is not untrue, but incomplete; which is consistently the case with the other contemporary critical reviews of his work. Regardless of whether or not the assessment was accurate, he applied a vernacular that had evolved out of discourse on Impressionism and its concerns.²⁷⁷ Ruminations on the light in his work were not limited to the advocates of Impressionism, however. The Naturists in France and their supporters attempted to appropriate van Gogh's work in these terms, while other groups disassociated from him based on his presumed affiliations.²⁷⁸.

Examination of van Gogh's relationship to the Symbolists further exemplifies the application of the comparative methodology as a tool for taking ownership of the enigmatic work. Those who strove to rally the Symbolist program in art attempted to explain his work in these terms. Aurier's 1890 essay, referencing van Gogh and describing the Symbolist/Synthetist program, created the climate for reviews of van

²⁷⁷ Van Gogh stated, "The effect of daylight and the sky means there are endless subjects to be found in olive trees;" but to focus merely on the Impressionistic aspects of the work misses other critical components such as its intensely spiritual color symbolism by which blue represents the Divine. H. Anna Suh, *Vincent Van Gogh: A Self-Portrait in Art and Letters* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2006), 294 and Vincent van Gogh and Ronald de Leeuw, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

²⁷⁸ Reference Charles-Louis Philippe's anti-Impressionism sentiment in Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 75-76; Affiliating his work with Impressionism, the advocates of Seurat and neo-Impressionism in France ignored van Gogh's work altogether. Writers who were sympathetic to the Seurat and Neo-Impressionists almost entirely ignored van Gogh, despite exhibiting among them (at Les Independants and Les XX), by equating his work with Impressionism. Gustave Kahn referred to van Gogh's *Still-Life: Parisian Novels with a Rose* (1887, exhibited 1888) as "more a study than a finished painting," Translated and cited by Zemel, 60. The alleged sketchy quality (a characteristic typically associated with Impressionism) of van Gogh's painting would not have corresponded to the Neo-Impressionists' consciously constructed and methodically executed constructions..

Gogh's art as associated with these principles.²⁷⁹ This included the work's visionary compositions - interpreted as private fantasy - as well as symbolic meaning materializing in line, color, or form.²⁸⁰ Once more, critics were fragmenting the work and fixating on aspects which could justify its affiliation with an artistic program. Without considering the work in its entirety is to overlook its singularity. In fact, Aurier asserts that to review van Gogh's work without considering the ideistic tenets associated with Symbolism is to render it "utterly incomprehensible," a characteristic we have demonstrated evoked consistently negative critical response.²⁸¹

Still, certain aspects of van Gogh's work never correlated to fundamental Symbolist priorities. His compositions lack the emblematic dreamlike qualities, could hardly be considered decadent, and were deemed by some critics to be too

²⁷⁹ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 63-65. Taken from Zemel's translations and summations of the French writings of Aurier.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 61-62, 78; Though true with regard to van Gogh's symbolic use of color, Aurier is misleading in the interpretation of "personal fantasy" in the work, as van Gogh's paintings were not dreamlike visions as described by Symbolist doctrine. However, it is clear how compositions such as *Starry Night* (1889) - with "skies that sometimes dazzle" and landscapes that flame "like the effervescence of multicolored enamels" - could have been mistakenly attributed as such. G. Albert Aurier, "The Isolated Ones," *Mercure de France* (January 1890), at the Vincent van Gogh Gallery, under "Archives: Miscellaneous," <http://www.vggallery.com/misc/archives/aurier.htm> (accessed September 21, 2011). He analogs van Gogh's work with other programs, such as realism and naturalism, but ultimately Rather, van Gogh was looking closely and intensely at the natural world, a crucial element of his work that divided him from Symbolists; Images at the Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, under "The Works," <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/catalog/Painting/260/Landscape-Under-a-Stormy-Sky.html> (accessed September 21, 2011).

²⁸¹ G. Albert Aurier, "The Isolated Ones," *Mercure de France* (January 1890), at the Vincent van Gogh Gallery, under "Archives: Miscellaneous," <http://www.vggallery.com/misc/archives/aurier.htm> (accessed September 21, 2011). He analogs van Gogh's work with other programs, such as realism and naturalism, but ultimately concludes that "He is, *almost always* [author's italics], a Symbolist..."

impassioned to communicate through formal visual elements.²⁸² The work's non-conformity with these aspects of the Symbolist program is evidenced in a survey of the entire body of his work. The considerable attention to imagery depicting peasant life and the humility conveyed in such paintings as *Cottage with Decrepit Barn and Stooping Woman* (1885) or his iconic work *The Potato Eaters* (1885) lacks decadence or dreamlike qualities. Rather, they are irreconcilable with these characteristics in that they evoke an earthiness that is antithetical to the otherworldly fantasies fundamental to Symbolism. Van Gogh himself firmly declared the work's roots in the natural world and even stated, "What I have done is a rather hard and coarse reality beside their abstractions, but it will have a rustic quality, and will smell of the earth."²⁸³ As in the case of his art's Impressionistic inconsistencies, its inability to be defined entirely by Symbolist dogma with which it was aligned led necessarily to its negative reviews when considering it within the parameters – and using the language – of such a program. Eventually, Gauguin and his followers deemed him a liability to their cause, and they ceased writing about him altogether.

Simultaneously, and due in part to these associations with the Symbolists, much of the criticism renouncing van Gogh came from those endorsing an anti-Symbolist program that returned to the classical values of harmony, reason, and order of pre-Romanticism. Advocates of this classicizing sentiment included Camille Mauclair (1872-1945), who wrote arts critiques for the *Mercure de France* after Aurier's death,

²⁸² Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 62.

²⁸³ This was written to his brother Theo van Gogh in reference to the work of Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin. To Theo, St. Remy, n.d. [ca. November 1889] in Herschel Browning Chipp, Peter Howard Selz, and Joshua Charles Taylor, *Theories of Modern Art; A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 44.

and took a more conservative stance toward aesthetics.²⁸⁴ The pervasive volatility of such van Gogh paintings as *Night Café in the Place Lamartine in Arles* (1888) or *Bedroom in Arles* (1888) – their discordant colors and unsettling perspective – could not have been validated by terminology associated with the traditional academic standards promoted by Mauclair. He and other critics sharing his aesthetic preferences would have been unable to characterize van Gogh’s work as “balanced, ‘healthy,’ and stylistically resolved.”²⁸⁵ Instead, it was repudiated for its “unpredictable nature.”²⁸⁶ To that end, supporters of a return to classicism had no use for van Gogh’s temperamental paintings, and he was altogether ignored from this segment of the arts community.²⁸⁷

With no particular school with which to conform, his irrelevance resulted in critical disregard from this sector as well. Though modernism had expanded the canon, the history of prejudicial dogma endured. Whether nature over fantasy, classicism over modernism, or otherwise, van Gogh’s work could not be defined solely by the language of any one campaign. Universally, discourse culminated in discussions over temperament in the work, regardless of critical disagreement over its role in creating art.

²⁸⁴ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 73-74. Camille Mauclair was a pen name for Severin Faust, a French poet and art critic. *Mercure de France* was originally a literary magazine, which evolved over the course of nearly two centuries, changing names, purpose and affiliations; In addition to Mauclair, the Greek art critic and poet Jean Moreas (1856-1910) and conservative, French nationalist Charles Maurras (1868-1952) were leaders in the charge against the decadence and obscurity of Symbolism, demanding a return to the simplicity of classicism.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 74. In his 1895 column, Mauclair criticized post-Impressionism and called for a move toward art with these characteristics; Images at the Vincent Van Gogh Gallery, under “The Works,” <http://www.vangoghgallery.com/catalog/Painting/260/Landscape-Under-a-Stormy-Sky.html> (accessed September 21, 2011).

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-76. On Moreas’ call to classical values and traditional literary forms in art.

As we will address, it was the consistent return to debate on the topic that ultimately led to the artist's inclusion in the canon.

Henri Rousseau

The phenomenon associated with the comparative critical methodology materializes with clarity when considering the contemporary criticism of Henri Rousseau. His reviews illustrated the use of the term “primitive” in art and signaled a transition of the word from negative to positive (and eventually negative again), elucidating the process by which a critical vocabulary can evolve. The term was appropriated, and the meaning of the signpost morphed without the signifier itself ever changing – a concept explored by many scholars.²⁸⁸ Prior to its transition, “primitive” indicated a negative condition in art, as it still represented values in opposition to the academic aesthetics historically promoted.²⁸⁹ In light of modernity, anything anti-academic was becoming representative of the avant-garde; consequently, as the new approaches toward art-making gained momentum, aesthetic qualities associated with

²⁸⁸ Reiterating Footnote 130, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist views and theories on binary oppositions were derived from and first applied in the realm of literary criticism. His theories have since been applied to the visual arts, having significant influence on Feminist theories. Of particular interest in the case of Rousseau is his notion of reversal of conceptual hierarchies in binary oppositions. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass trans. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1978); Nancy J. Holland, *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); also, Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit, *Criticism and Lacan: Essays and Dialogue on Language, Structure, and the Unconscious* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

²⁸⁹ It was negative in that it was not representative of the classical notions of art – specifically art as an intellectual (and educational) pursuit – as taught and endorsed by the academies. Non-western cultures were, by this measure, not producing “art.” See Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art: Past and Present, 1940* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973); Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971).

the new art directives also advanced. A new art language was developing rooted in this fundamental polarity, both aesthetically and literally, and this included the re-appropriation of terms like “primitive.’ Interpretations of the term evolved through discourse surrounding artists like Gauguin and Rousseau and eventually Picasso.²⁹⁰ Through critical debate associated with these and other modern artists, the formal elements associated with primitivism became defensible.

The evolution of the terminology in Rousseau’s work affords a richer understanding of how critical methodology and its limitations lead to the initial dismissal of artists by nature of their irrelevance. *The World’s Masters* publication reviewing the work of Henri Rousseau more than two decades after the artist’s death exemplifies the transformative phenomenon.²⁹¹ In one regard, “primitivism” continued to be condemned in the text, particularly with regard to those artists - like Gauguin - who were

²⁹⁰ See prior footnote. Further, in light of the perceived distractions of modernity, artists like Gauguin and Picasso glorified “primitive” cultures in an attempt to seek universality in art. It has since been argued that this perceived reverence for non-Western cultures actually perpetuated concepts of “otherness” and acted to marginalize them, particularly women. See Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism" in *The Expanded Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, N. Broude and M. Garrard (Eds.). New York: Harper Collins, 1986.

²⁹¹ Anthony Bertram, introduction to *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*. *The World’s Masters* 18 (London; New York: The Studio Ltd.; The Studio Publications, Inc., 1936). The plates published here not only reference commentary by Anthony Bertram, but also include revealing assertions made by gallery owners like Paul Rosenberg. Anthony Bertram (1897-1978) was a British novelist and prolific writer on fine arts. For a list of publications, see <http://www.google.com/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=inauthor:anthony+inauthor:bertram&num=1>; Paul Rosenberg (1881-1959) was a renowned French art dealer and collector with galleries in France, England, and the United States. The plate notes Rosenberg’s possession of the piece – whether in his gallery or as part of his private collection – at the time of Bertam’s publication. MoMA.org, <http://www.worldcat.org/title/paul-rosenberg-and-company-from-france-to-america/oclc/671244657?title=&detail=&page=frame&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.moma.org%2Finteractives%2Fexhibitions%2F2010%2Fpaulrosenberg%2F%23top%26checksum%3Db7cb8d98808b9993463ffc585b01e958&linktype=digitalObject> (accessed September 11, 2011).

preoccupied with eschewing modern society.²⁹² The subtleties in the phrasing of Rousseau's critical reviews compliment the non-primitive features of his work, thus condemning those aspects of primitivism explored by other artists. For example, Paul Rosenberg praises *Landscape* (Plate V) for its "asphalted nature, accepted without any restless nostalgia for the 'wide open spaces.'"²⁹³ According to this reference, it is objectionable to be an artist who wishes to flee modernity and dwell among uncivilized cultures; and primitivism in this regard is admonished. Again, the text accompanying *Landscape* (Plate IX), states: "A plantation interests him just as much as a primeval forest. He accepts: he always accepts."²⁹⁴ Rousseau accepts the modern world; he does not reject it. The endorsement of Rousseau's acceptance of the modern world is a condemnation of "primitives" who do not. Similar language is used to validate Rousseau's jungle paintings, which could be construed as a rejection of modernity in a manner similar to Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes.²⁹⁵ Great care is taken, however, to differentiate Rousseau's images of the jungle as a mere fantasy; he had not literally escaped from the modern world, nor was he idealizing it. Instead, he was constructing a

²⁹² In rejection of modernity, artists like Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard shunned modern Parisian life by leaving the city and looking for inspiration in rural or exotic locations. Lynda Jessup, *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

²⁹³ Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, Plate V. Now referred to as *Landscape with Factory* (1896-1906).

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Plate IX. Now referred to as *River Bank* (1890).

²⁹⁵ Compare Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910) to Gauguin's *Seed of Areoi* (1892) . Images at http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A5056&page_number=4&template_id=1&sort_order=1; and http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3ADE%3AI%3A5JG%3AHO%3AE%3A1&page_number=8&template_id=1&sort_order=1.

forest using the modern visual language of primitivism, and his exotic imagery was not deemed a rejection of bourgeois society.

Conversely, critics in the same publication commend certain aspects of primitivism, particularly the formal qualities traditionally maligned for seeming childlike. Until the emergence of modern art, a “primitive” aesthetic was deemed childlike in a derogatory sense, because it referred to art created by the uneducated. In that context, the word was assigned meaning based on its relationship to the standards of judgment endorsed by the academies and promoted through that education. Thus, art defined by “childlike” terminology was reproached in its opposing relationship to the critical language developed within the existing system. Deviating from this conventional sentiment, Bertram states that Rousseau examined the natural world with “the high seriousness of a child.”²⁹⁶ By attaching positive associations to the word, he diminishes the negativity inferred by “childlike” art and subtly alters its meaning. The “high seriousness” refers to the intense observation of the natural world by those who, like children, have not been prejudiced by the educational institutions. Rousseau’s attention to detail materializes in paintings like *Exotic Landscape* (1908) and *Bouquet of Flowers* (1910) through his deliberate depiction of each individual leaf, petal, and stem.²⁹⁷ Consequently, the meaning of childlike primitivism evolved, becoming a reference to the visual language – the formal elements in his work. The concept is further clarified by Bertram when he praises the artist’s “childlike – not childish – joy in colours and

²⁹⁶ Anthony Bertram, introduction to *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*. The World’s Masters 18 (London; New York: The Studio Ltd.; The Studio Publications, Inc., 1936), 3.

²⁹⁷ Images at <http://www.henrirousseau.org/>.

patterns...,” establishing a clear distinction between the two.²⁹⁸ Rousseau’s primitive lack in education served him well, as he was now considered fortunate in his “rare blessedness of being free from art education” and “freedom from learned conventions.”²⁹⁹

From the work of Henri Rousseau, critics were able to extract the elements of “primitivism” acceptable (ie. formal qualities) and still denounce it (ie. the “barbarism” of the uncultured). A new, acceptable primitivism was created; the meaning of the word evolved, without abandoning the word itself. What was an acceptable primitivism included the adoption of a primitive aesthetic, evidenced by formal elements in art, but not the perceived social debasement of the artist. Rousseau was praised for his primitivism in “creat[ing] the beautiful,” while not renouncing his bourgeois, civilized roots.³⁰⁰ As such, he could be “delighted by the ‘quaintness’ of old villages and village folk,” but only with “a townsman’s spirit.”³⁰¹ Alex Reid and Lefevre articulated the notion best: “Rousseau is a Primitive who accepts the nineteenth century.”³⁰² In this case, “Primitive” is even capitalized, bestowing upon it a certain importance that separates it from the derogatory implications for the word.

²⁹⁸ Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, 8.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 5; Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 21.

³⁰⁰ Referring to *The Rose Candle*, in Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, Plate XVIII.

³⁰¹ M. Knoedler & Company on *Landscape*, in Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, Plate III.

³⁰² “Pont de Grenelle,” in Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, Plate VIII. Alex Reid and Earnest Lefevre were competing dealers of French Impressionist and Modern Art in the United Kingdom, who joined to become the Lefevre Gallery, which is still operating in London. Lefevre Gallery, <http://www.lefevrefineart.com/aboutus.php> (accessed September 11, 2011).

In the process of modernizing the language for critical evaluation, the anti-academic, avant-garde art directive was advanced without abolishing the institution itself. Through this transformation in the meaning of a word, one can witness a paradigm shift in the academic system. Now, the anti-academic (of Primitivism) was acceptable – but only formally speaking – thus preserving the sanctity and power of the institution as a whole. Modernism and the language associated with it effectively inverted the paradigm for critical success.³⁰³ The academic world, once praised for its allegiance to strict classical training, was condemned in light of modernity and its negative associations to the bourgeoisie; once modern art was established as an acceptable aesthetic pursuit (if not fully endorsed by all) through a plethora of scholarly discourse it was accepted by the very institutions it opposed. In essence, modern art became the “new academic,” and the avant-garde standards for judgment from which it originated have maintained through Western institutions of art today.

The Shift To Personal Criticism

Review of contemporary criticism of these artists revealed consistent phenomena in the methodology and the aesthetic criticism dictated by the preconditions and limitations of the comparative analysis. After attempts to discount the aesthetic value in

³⁰³ Explicating the transformation of primitivism in art are the well-articulated arguments of Frances S. Connelly in *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907*. Though a later publication and a secondary reference to early Rousseau criticism, it offers valuable insight into this phenomenon. Her interpretation of the development of the term is based on this theory, and she declares that “primitivism itself represented the inverse of classicism,” which culminated in an art historical methodology that focused on formal qualities alone, irrespective of other content. Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

the work, criticism consistently redirects to the artist on a personal level. This pattern is revealed in further exploration of these four cases, and the culprit remains the limited tools for valuation. For different reasons and to different degrees, the artists maintained a public presence, which commanded some form of retaliation by those determined to relegate the non-conforming artists to the ranks of anonymity. The frustration accompanying the inability to articulate justification for this position resulted in the condemnation of the person behind the art. The most conspicuous denouncement is madness, and the condition is most evident in the cases of William Blake and Vincent van Gogh.³⁰⁴

William Blake, the “misunderstood” artist, was stigmatized as a madman. Wittreich recounts that Malkin “criticized him [Blake] with the eyes of a mathematician and tied down his genius, stigmatizing him as ‘an engraver, who might do well, if he was not mad.’”³⁰⁵ Blake commanded recognition of his work, because he was by all accounts a very capable engraver. There were no critical assaults of any merit made on his talents as such. His abilities in this regard placed him in the public eye, but his own designs subjected him to the criticisms previously outlined.

Regardless of the cause or merits of the attention Blake received, when all other assessments of him turned futile, and Blake persevered on his course as an artist rather than committing himself solely as a professional engraver, criticism was redirected to the artist himself – particularly his mental condition. Turning again to Malkin, he points out this theory with clarity: “The more ‘rational believer’ is against the ‘visionary’ and

³⁰⁴ Runge was an “artistic outsider” but a likeable guy and hardly capable of being vilified in the way Blake and van Gogh were. The same is true of Rousseau, so less of this type of personal attack is evident in their criticism.

³⁰⁵ Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 26.

dismisses him through a 'cry of madness.'"³⁰⁶ Malkin asserts that due to Blake's lack of adherence to the preferred conventions of the period rooted in rational thought, rather than seriously address the work for its singular imaginative qualities, he is simply repudiated based on his alleged mental instability. A discreditation of "Blake the man" would have been easy to formulate, as the artist offered a plethora of fodder to those seeking to dismiss him; William Blake is renowned for his prescribed madness. Blake was radically religious, and he frequently recalled conversations he had with the Holy Spirit as well as dead artists. Secondary recounts of his remarks, made even by friends, have made it easy for historians to build a case for Blake's insanity and perpetuate this claim.³⁰⁷ However, there is a strong case against this. It is not my intention to argue Blake's diagnosis here, but rather to highlight the process by which "misunderstood" artists are assessed when a climate and nomenclature for addressing their work does not exist. In this state of misunderstanding, frustrated contemporary critics revert to personal assessments that should be irrelevant in the discussion of the work.

Perhaps no artist exemplifies this phenomenon more than Vincent van Gogh. As previously mentioned, most discussion on van Gogh in one way or another related to temperament. Discussion of temperament in the art eventually evolved into a discussion of the temperament of the artist – the art product being seen as a direct extension or reflection of the latter. Those that supported van Gogh's aesthetic

³⁰⁶ Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 25.

³⁰⁷ Henry Crabb Robinson journals of attempting to communicate with him regarding his art, but concedes the difficulties, nay futility, in trying to do so. Blake often went into a "rambling state" spouting "extravagant and mad doctrines." He eventually goes so far as to define Blake as "the insane poet, painter, and engraver." Wittreich, *Nineteenth Century Accounts*, 61-83.

necessarily promoted the artist more than the art and effectively contributed to the development of his self-sacrificial persona,³⁰⁸ the myth of the artist that has endured interminably. This applies mostly to the nationalistic motivations particularly evident in the Netherlands because van Gogh was a Dutchman, and also in Germany where the anti-foreign sentiment was ultimately replaced with positive assessment for what was deemed spiritual content and German in nature.

Those who rejected van Gogh's temperamental, emotional, and unconventional manner dismissed the work as nothing more than the product of mental illness. David van der Kellen stated, ". . . the sick condition of his mind, that led to such a tragic end, prevented him from thinking and feeling soundly. What we see here are the creations of a sick mind."³⁰⁹ Words like "thinking" and "soundly" convey allegiance to the classically derived notion that art should be appropriately idealized through rational construction. The existence of these expectations is suggested by Jan Veth: "...it was something so entirely different from the instruments with whose sounds cultivated people had surrounded themselves, in that especially lay the reasons why his very simple word is so little understood."³¹⁰ Art lacking these conventions and, instead, possessing singular qualities for which a refined, resolved, accepted vocabulary did not exist, was brusquely discredited as the "visual ravings of an adult maniac."³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Both van Eeden and de Meester tried, in their language and criticism, to "protect van Gogh from conventional critical standards...by promoting him and his work beyond the world of conventional art." Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 19-20.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 21.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

³¹¹ Robert Ross of Morning Post in England on the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition entitled "Manet and the Post-Impressionists," in Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 140.

The psychological analysis of the work became the focus.³¹² This is very clear in England, where Fry's dominant methodologies dependant on formal design left no room for van Gogh's seemingly unstructured, irrational compositions that were associated with the Post-Impressionists.³¹³ Other critics developing similar modern vocabularies followed suit, and the harsh personal criticisms followed. Robert Ross of the Morning Post declared "the emotions of these painters (one of whom, van Gog [*sic*], was a lunatic) are of no interest except to the student of pathology and the specialist in abnormality."³¹⁴ Similarly, the Manchester Guardian argued that van Gogh's "eccentricities of brushwork" expressed "nothing so much as the mental derangement which the unfortunate man was approaching."³¹⁵

The allegiance to tradition was strongly advocated in contemporary reviews of the same show. Robert Morely of Nation purported, "If English art is not to be dragged in the mud, if we are to uphold the great traditions of the past...such exhibitions as this must cease, for disease and pestilence are apt to spread;" the August Athenaeum "cautioned against the careless abandonment of tradition."³¹⁶ Some critics and historians were threatened by any serious recognition of artwork that does not follow the doctrines prescribed in the evolutionary environment of the Western art scene at the

³¹² Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 40. Particularly in the first decades of twentieth century in Netherlands, metaphysical aspects in terms of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Bergson or clinical aspects in terms of Freud.

³¹³ In the process of development of his theories, Fry did have a brief interest in emotionality in art, but this was only temporary and replaced with a focus on "significant form." REF

³¹⁴ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 139.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

turn of the twentieth century. In order to defuse the positions of those that would support the work, the artist is marginalized through a personal attack, and in the case of van Gogh and Blake, by being denounced as mad.

Reassessment of Art Through Application of Evolved Critical Tools

During the individual lifetimes of the four artists surveyed, each was either negatively reviewed or disregarded entirely but is now recognized for his contributions to the history of art. Working in different times and places, each case demonstrates a similar course for critical development and eventual recognition. The third phase of critical assessment evident among them culminates with their revisitation, evaluation, and canonization. To that end, it is important to address the final phase in this process with regard to these artists for what it reveals about the current system.

In the case of Rousseau, research revealed a process by which a new language for criticism - or in his case, the redefining via a reevaluation of existing terminology – can evolve as the critical climate becomes more favorable. It was not possible for critics to comprehensively address his strikingly singular aesthetic without the language of modernism. It evolved amid a cultural explosion of new artistic ideologies and directions, and its application transformed the critical consensus in that regard. Prior to this, his work was cast by comparison into the position opposing the accepted standards for art, as reflected in the language of his antagonists. Armed with evolved critical tools, his work was evaluated favorably, promoting eventual entrance into the canon.

William Blake was buried a virtual unknown, and his death was followed by critical silence for three decades. G. E. Bentley even devotes a section of his *Blake Records Supplement and Critical Heritage* compilation to what he calls the “Forgotten Years.”³¹⁷ The artist arose from obscurity only after the publication of Alexander Gilchrist’s biography, *The Life of William Blake*, which attempted to shed new light on the artist’s work and dispel some of the rumors that had been perpetuated, including those discounting him as a madman. By the time of its release in the 1860s, the critical climate had changed for myriad reasons. The vocabulary of Romanticism was fully resolved, and a greater acceptance predominated for art that harnessed the power of the imagination. Courbet, Manet, Cezanne, and others were forging a new path for art in the age of modernity, and consistent discourse regarding these predecessors of the avant-garde allowed a new language to emerge. Together, these factors culminated in conditions favorable to Blake.

In order to address the art of modernity, art historians were motivated to reconcile the past. Equipped with a diverse nomenclature of newly invented and accepted terms, they could applaud his “expressiveness” and “creativity.” Such attributions were never articulated by his own contemporary critics, because the terminology had not yet developed (though allusions to both were made, but only negatively). With a new artistic climate fostering interest in researching the impetus and development of new art, historians revisited Blake’s work and reassessed it applying their own culture’s critical values and tools. In this manner, they rescued the artist from

³¹⁷ Years 1831 to 1862.

obscurity. He is now considered by many to be the “greatest artist Britain has ever produced.”³¹⁸

Philip Otto Runge died in obscurity in 1810 and was not “rediscovered” until the 1940s. Bisanz explains Runge’s revival more than a century after his death as a reflection of the critic’s need to understand a later historical discovery by revisiting the past. He supports the notion that a critic attempts to employ the evaluation of an earlier work to assist him in understanding the later development.³¹⁹ Expanding on that theory, it is my contention that it is the presence and use of more fully developed critical devices that facilitate an historian’s ability to do so. The impetus for revisitation aside, the exploration of current-day artistic phenomena is benefited by the validation of past singularities. In such cases, obscure theories and aesthetics can be appropriated to assist the historian in building his thesis. The lack of supporting materials only acts to their benefit, because the void leaves room for liberal interpretation. Once the cultural values of the present - as represented by the language of that present - have been applied to the past, the two are linked forever in a linear art history, and the canonization is fully resolved.

Such is the case for Philip Otto Runge. Though some historians call for a more comprehensive evaluation of Runge’s contribution, his significance was posthumously developed and maintained in response to Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Expressionism. The evaluation of the “isms” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries commanded the resurrection of Runge’s art. Loyal to the comparative

³¹⁸ Jonathan Jones, “Blake’s Heaven: Only one British artist would make it on to a list of the world’s all-time greatest,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2005/apr/25/williamblake> (accessed April 29, 2011).

³¹⁹ Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 23.

methodology of critical assessment, historians looked for links to their present to employ as “forerunners” of these later developments. Runge’s work possessed characteristics that proved beneficial in this pursuit. He was hailed a century later for his treatment of “light” and “color” and all that these subsequently developed terms reflect and represent to Impressionism. His color mysticism and its subjective implications have been deemed predecessors of Expressionism. And most importantly, according to Otto Georg Von Simson, Runge’s devotion to the creation of a new “art of landscape” was interpreted as “foreshadowing the most significant artistic conception of the nineteenth century: the landscape.”³²⁰ Still, it was more specifically the critical nomenclature that had evolved out of discourse on these later aesthetic styles, interests, or movements that was ultimately responsible for enabling the resurrection and eventual assimilation of Runge accounting for his inclusion in the canon of art history.

The same dynamics are operating in the case of Vincent van Gogh, but what occurred after his death was slightly different than for Blake, Runge, and Rousseau. The nationalistic concerns across Europe were salient, and van Gogh’s work was often hotly debated in these terms. His nebulous imagery was interpreted in accordance with the shifting political currents, and criticism was assigned only as it enabled the promotion of these causes.³²¹ This phenomenon is exemplified in Germany, where his work was first reviewed as representative of the negative effects of foreign influence; but as the martyred hero image of van Gogh was developed, the artist filled a

³²⁰ Otto Georg Von Simson, “Philipp Otto Runge and the Mythology of Landscape,” *The Art Bulletin* 24, no. 4 (December 1942), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046845> (accessed August 16, 2010), 335.

³²¹ Refer back to earlier footnote and following one.

nationalistic need for spiritual guidance.³²² The work was also assumed by the socialist cause, which advanced his persona as a “social radical,” a “rebel”, and even a “good-willing reformer-anarchist.”³²³ Whether accurate or not, the ebbs and flows of such discourse revitalized the interest in van Gogh and his work.

As new artistic theories developed, van Gogh’s work was appropriated for the advancement of these ideologies.³²⁴ Supporters of subjectivist artistic movements sought to use van Gogh to substantiate their own aesthetic sensibilities. The one consistent theme in the contemporary criticism of van Gogh’s art upon which critics agreed was its manifestation of temperament.³²⁵ Whether a proponent of this direction in art or not, the discourse on the subject fostered development of terminology devoted to this subject. Eventually, what began as conversations about “temperament” concluded in designations associated with “expressionism.”

Max Osborn and Meier-Graefe redefined post-Impressionism as “a subjective, synthetic approach which produced emotionally laden symbolic images . . . [and] . . . so prepared the ground for critical understanding of van Gogh as an Expressionist precursor.”³²⁶ Supporters of all burgeoning expressionistic movements validated their own pursuits by referencing the work of van Gogh. The young painters who showed at

³²² When it was being compared to Impressionism and categorized as an extension of it, it was argued that it was too “French.” (Zemel, section on Germany 1900-1920) and p. 120.

³²³ For specific quotes, see Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, including H. J. Haverman, 28-29; Frans Coenen, 27; and August Vermeylen, 29.

³²⁴ Particularly associated with Der Brucke, Fauves, Blue Reiter Zemel

³²⁵ “Inevitable, it seemed, every discussion of van Gogh, including Meyer-Reifstahl’s analysis of his style, cited his self-expressive intentions and temperament.” Zemel, 143

³²⁶ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 119.

the 1912 Sonderbund exhibition were all placed under the label of “expressionism,” including Die Brücke, Der Blaue Reiter, Cubist, Futurist, and Russian artists. Though van Gogh’s work was not shown, he was hailed as a pioneer and called “the providential phenomenon in the development of modern art to a radical Expressionism.”³²⁷ By the 1920s, the “initial battles about abstraction and self-expression had been fought for the moment, and the furor of Expressionism subsided, leaving van Gogh an established master in its wake.”³²⁸ The “misunderstood” work was indeterminate and capable of being commandeered for different causes. The associated nomenclature, which evolved from the critical discourse that erupted around these causes, was applied retrospectively to van Gogh’s work decades after his death. The artist whose work was shunned because it evaded every existing classification was redefined through a process of appropriation, validation, and consequential canonization.

The practice of orchestrating artist intention where supporting documentation is sparse or absent is common among artists, critics, and historians. This makes obscure artists particularly vulnerable to such subversion. Frequently critics and art historians refer to the work of artists whose work they cannot fully endorse, nor wholly reject, as simply “unresolved.” The open-ended, noncommittal nature of the term affords great flexibility in interpretation. The term implies that the work would have eventually been something that it was not. On van Gogh, A. C. Loffelt queried, “If the unfortunate painter had lived, would he ever have succeeded in developing a remarkable effort into

³²⁷ Paul Mahlberg, critic for the Berliner Zeitung, published in Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 121.

³²⁸ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 130.

a mature and beautiful art?”³²⁹ Ferdinand Keizer referred to van Gogh’s finished works as sketches and laments, “One feels here that one has to do with an essential talent that was cut off in its development.”³³⁰ Runge’s work, too, was considered unresolved due to his untimely death.³³¹ Historians attempt to resolve the work in association with their own theses, and this, too, contributes to resurrection and canonization.

Art historians seek to reconcile their and their colleagues’ critical assessments with the past. In doing so, they commonly ruminate upon the abstract notion that the artist was simply “ahead of their time.”³³² This is only a statement that can be concluded in hindsight, and it is a direct product of the historian’s creation of links from present to past through the aforementioned process of validation, appropriation, and consequential canonization. In order to fully resolve the discrepancies between their own theories and the conclusions of past academics, the obscure notion is postulated. This is an odd and contradictory, somewhat passively esoteric claim in that it ignores the reality that they were, in fact, of their time. They could be nothing else, and capitulation ignores the reality of what actually is.

Rather, the “their time” to which historians refer is a condition in which the appropriate tools for assessing the work had simply not yet developed. The deficiency

³²⁹ Zemel, *Formation of a Legend*, 21.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

³³¹ Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 25.

³³² On Rousseau: When all else fails, Bertram attributes dismissal of men like Rousseau and Blake to the inability of people to “really grasp the astonishing fact, because of its rarity, that there *are* men occasionally who genuinely do not belong to their times.” (Bertram, *Henri Rousseau, Le Douanier, 1844-1910*, 5). Likewise, Bisanz says of Runge that he fell into obscurity because he was “too far in advance of his times to be accepted by them.” (Bisanz, *German Romanticism and Runge*, 22). On Van Gogh: FINISH VG

was revealed through recognitions of patterns that evolve when using the approaches associated with conventional critical methodology. Its comparative basis sets up a binary that is exclusionary by nature in that the language necessary to initiate such a process is limited to what already exists. Such a nomenclature is not equipped to address art that exists on the fringe or out of that system entirely, thereby creating a polarity that automatically rejects that which does not conform. Historians who aim to reject the work, whether well-founded or short-sighted in their conclusions, are limited to the same existing critical tools regardless. This condition creates visible consistencies in the treatment of art and artists who fall into this category, and these categorical constants apply to Thomas Kinkade as well.

CHAPTER 4

APPLICATION OF FINDINGS TO CRITICISM OF KINKADE

Having explored the contemporary criticism of four posthumously canonized artists, it has been concluded that the evaluative process employed in assessment was consistent among them; it was administered through a comparative methodological process lacking in sufficient evaluative critical tools in the form an inclusive vocabulary. Juxtaposition of this process's relationship to the critical development of the work and career of Thomas Kinkade exposes strong similarities. While Kinkade was evolving as an artist in the traditional sense by attending art school and exhibiting at galleries, there was indifference from the art world. The impetus for eventual critical response spawned from Kinkade's financial success and undeniable visibility. His designation as "America's most collected living artist" demanded recognition in some form.

As established, no scholarly art journal has been prepared to offer Kinkade any serious consideration; but there is no lack of discourse among the popular media outlets, and writers for these publications often consult and cite critics with more academic credentials. They consider Kinkade's work in a strikingly similar fashion to the artists we surveyed from one and two centuries prior. Examination of these commentaries reveals that his work is being subjected to the same comparative critical methodology. However, the binaries in the paradigm have reversed. What were once the standards against which art was measured are now the antithesis of those ideals. Modernity signaled the break from tradition, and the new standard of taste became the anti-academic. Blake and Runge were criticized for being too obscure in a neoclassical

environment that revered the dignity in simplicity; in contrast, Kinkade's work is denigrated for its lack of intellectual or visual complexity.⁴²⁸

Evidenced by the language of criticism, the art's lack in "weight and richness" deems it "vapid."⁴²⁹ The resulting visual accessibility, in which Kinkade takes great pride, is in direct opposition to present-day institutional expectations. The aesthetic standards by which art is judged have inverted, but the method by which criticism is applied has not. The comparative methodology endures, resulting in the same condition: an art that is inherently in opposition to critical standards of taste and judgment. The most common judgment pronounced, according to Kinkade, is that his work is "irrelevant."⁴³⁰ He is perplexed by the notion that an artist can be deemed irrelevant when his images are beloved by millions of people worldwide. Like Blake, Kinkade's work is considered irrelevant in the sense that it does not represent the perspective of the times - the zeitgeist of the art world. In other words, it does not possess the qualifiers endorsed by the art establishment.

The deficiency in applicable tools is clearly evidenced when critics resort to blatantly non-academic terminology. Lacking the language of criticism to appropriately address the work, they use words like "cheesy" and "clumsy," implying a critique of both

⁴²⁸ "To high-art types Mr. Kinkade's sentimental belief in uplift is a key reason his work is so unappealing. "It's about reaffirming images that are comfortable, which isn't very interesting," says Gary Garrels, the chief curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "There's just very little to discuss there." DeCarlo, "Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?" *New York Times*.

⁴²⁹ Christina Waters, "Doubting Thomas," *Metro*; Robert Rosenblum of Guggenheim, NY, in DeCarlo, "Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?" *New York Times*.

⁴³⁰ Susan Orlean, "Art for Everybody," *New Yorker*, October 15, 2001, http://www.susanorlean.com/articles/art_for_everybody.php (accessed February 26, 2011).

the work and its buyers simultaneously through the accessible common-speak.⁴³¹ Less conspicuous - but no better articulated - are flimsy statements that judge it insufficiently as bad art. Peter Clothier, lacking the ability to compose a substantial argument, simply called his art “truly awful stuff.”⁴³² There is no shortage of well-spoken artists, critics, and historians; yet, this type of elementary, uninspired criticism represents what prevails from the critical sector. There is a clear absence of terminology appropriate to address Kinkade, and the inability to support a position leads to indignation, and frustration leads to hostility.

As demonstrated by many of the adversaries of Blake and others, the tone of the criticism delivered in the cases of “misunderstood” artists is often hostile. Passively dismissive comments turn to vitriol, fueled by the inevitable frustration created by the inability - due to the limitations of the comparative methodology - to articulate even the most legitimate objections. When artists who should simply vanish - by estimation of these adversarial critics - continue to command a presence; that presence demands riposte, the cycle is perpetuated, and the aggravation elevates. Charles Paul Freund for *Reason* magazine quotes the art magazine *Flak*, which assesses Kinkade with caustic words like “insidious” and virulently condemns him as a “damning indictment of our society.”⁴³³ In one sentence, Peter Clothier rolls out a series of attacks that range from

⁴³¹ Stated by Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle art critic, in DeCarlo, “Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?” *New York Times*.

⁴³² Peter Clothier, “Thomas Kinkade: Curated by Jeffrey Vallance,” *Art Scene*, May 2004, <http://www.artscenecal.com/ArticlesFile/Archive/Articles2004/Articles0504/TKinkadeA.html> (accessed April 27, 2009).

⁴³³ Charles Paul Freund, “Art in Its Own Light,” *Reason*, October 2000, <http://reason.com/archives/2000/10/01/art-in-its-own-light> (accessed April 25, 2009).

passive to scathing: “It’s cliché’d, sentimental, trite, complacently commercial, glaringly dishonest, self-righteous, falsely pious.”⁴³⁴

Despite the attempts by critics to delegitimize Thomas Kinkade, the popularity of his work prevails. The imagery exists in an estimated one million homes in America, and Kinkade is quick to boast of his achievements. His own language is frequently antagonistic, which acts to further fuel the hostile exchanges between him and his critics. Kinkade regards the negative assessments of art critics as irrelevant, maintaining that they are merely failed artists who are jealous of his success. As he puts it: “Critics have always been the unemployed artist of each era. Those who write criticism often had earlier aspired to create that same form of product [leading to] resentment towards the success of others amongst critics in a given field.” He boldly avows: “The critics may not endorse me, but I own the hearts of the people.”⁴³⁵

His indignant provocation and the perpetual legitimization of Kinkade by the buying public generate animus from the blogisphere as well. These voices lack the artificial decorum of academia’s assaults and are issued mostly in the form of mockery. Derisive bloggers seem to delight in engaging with others who ridicule the artist and the artwork he produces.⁴³⁶ A group exhibition at Roq la Rue in Seattle entitled “Painters of Blight”

⁴³⁴ Peter Clothier, “Thomas Kinkade,” *Art Scene*.

⁴³⁵ Jeffrey Vallance, *Kinkade: Heaven On Earth* (San Francisco: Grand Central Press, 2004), 27.

⁴³⁶ To read what “the other” everyday people think about his work, visit weblogs such as DemocraticUnderground.com (http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=105x4055375).

featured adaptations to Thomas Kinkade images taken from one of his calendars.⁴³⁷ Websites exist such as somethingawful.com allowing readers to submit digitally rendered Kinkade images during “Photoshop Phriday.”⁴³⁸ And at least one artist/blogger has been inspired to present atypical Kinkade subjects in a perfectly rendered Kinkadian style, like *Meth Lab in the Woods* and *Crack House by the Viaduct*.⁴³⁹

Eventually, both anger and mockery are engaged to confront the artist on a personal level, thus fulfilling the second phase of critical involvement assigned to the artists of Chapter Four. The interests of the business sector facilitate personal discreditation creating a new dimension of criticism specific to capital markets. Threats to vested interests foster vilification of Kinkade by business affiliates with the same intensity that their presence acts to legitimize him. Animosity from the art community pales in comparison to the admonishment imposed by those with pecuniary grievances.

Gallery owners engaged in legal disputes with Kinkade hoped to recover losses on their investments by launching attacks on the artist intended to discredit his art by discrediting his personal reputation.⁴⁴⁰ During the litigation process, the artist’s

⁴³⁷ Mark Frauenfelder, “Painters of Blight’ Show at Roq la Rue in Seattle,” *boingboing*, June 30, 2004, <http://www.boingboing.net/2004/06/30/painters-of-blight-s.html> (accessed April 2, 2009).

⁴³⁸ For examples, visit Photoshop Phriday’s Paintings of Light entries from 2004 (<http://www.somethingawful.com/d/photoshop-phriday/paintings-light-part.php>).

⁴³⁹ Dr. Max [Pseud.], That One Blog, entry posted July 20, 2005, <http://that1blog.blogspot.com/2005/07/thomas-kinkades-meth-lab-in-woods-poor.html> (accessed April 25, 2009).

⁴⁴⁰ Rachel Konrad, “Artist Thomas Kinkade Under FBI Investigation, Ex Dealers Say.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 29, 2006. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2006/08/29/entertainment/e155230D41.DTL> (accessed April 25, 2009); Jack Fischer and San Jose Mercury News, “Kinkade Galleries Sue Distributor Media Arts Group Inc.,” *Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News*, July, 2003,

character was scrutinized and condemned. Witness testimonies linked Thomas Kinkade to appalling acts of public defecation, sexual harassment, and even wife-swapping.⁴⁴¹ "These dealers became investors primarily because they were believers in faith, love, family and God, and the paintings reflect those values," said Joseph Ejbeh, one of the attorneys for the plaintiffs. "A lot of these people were pulled into this scheme because of this representation, but what Thomas Kinkade's company did to them was despicable."⁴⁴² By the judge's determination, Kinkade deluded clients into investing in privately owned galleries by presenting himself and his artwork as Christian. However, what they learned about the artist was that the image he portrayed, the one in which they invested, was not a reality. The history of art celebrates the contributions of numerous carousing characters, but such behavior was unacceptable in the terms by which Thomas Kinkade was being judged.

The media was eager to join the crusade against Kinkade and became relentless in this pursuit. Tales of drunken misdeeds extracted from pages of testimony were devoured by the public in such articles as the *Los Angeles Times*' "Dark Portrait of a Painter of Light."⁴⁴³ The personal attacks that undermined his faith, his family, and his wealth digressed further by poking fun at the artist's weight gain in an article subtitled

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-104656026.html> (accessed April 2, 2009).

⁴⁴¹ Kinkade has never publicly addressed specific allegations, but in a group email to gallery licensees admitted that "he might have behaved badly during a stressful time, now behind him, during which he overindulged in food and drink . . ." Christensen, "Kinkade Defends Self," 2006.

⁴⁴² Konrad, "Kinkade Under FBI Investigation," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁴⁴³ See Chapter Two to revisit the specific incidents or Kim Christensen, "Dark Portrait of a Painter of Light," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2006, LA Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/mar/05/business/fi-kinkade5> (accessed 3/3/09).

“Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Lite?”⁴⁴⁴ Two weeks after his bankruptcy filing, Kinkade’s incarceration for drunk driving made the headlines.⁴⁴⁵ The media continued to follow and report the developments in Thomas Kinkade’s life, promoting a negative persona of the artist by illuminating his fall from grace. By the end of June 2010, their characterization was summarized in a blow at Kinkade’s sanity. The Salon.com article was succinctly entitled: “This Week in Crazy: Thomas Kinkade.”⁴⁴⁶ Like the dismissive tactics imposed on Van Gogh and Blake, when lacking critical depth and fair analysis, Kinkade adversaries relied upon mental degradation as the last step in dismantling the artist’s career and relegating him to the peripheries of irrelevance.

In the cases of the artists we reviewed, renown occurred after the development of an apropos language for critical assessment evolved and was applied retrospectively. But unlike Blake, Runge, Van Gogh, and Rousseau; Thomas Kinkade has yet to be addressed in such a manner. Regardless of whether or not his work should be praised or condemned, it is not possible to soundly articulate a position, as an equitable language has not developed. As established, Kinkade exists in both the business and

⁴⁴⁴ Kim Christensen, “Kinkade Defends Self But Says ‘Sorry,’” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2006, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/mar/09/business/fi-kinkade9?pg=1> (accessed June 5, 2009). Kinkade has never publicly addressed specific allegations, but in a group email to gallery licensees admitted that “he might have behaved badly during a stressful time, now behind him, during which he overindulged in food and drink . . .”

⁴⁴⁵ Kate Linthicum, “Painter Thomas Kinkade Arrested Near Carmel on Suspicion of DUI,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/06/thomas-kinkade-duc-drunken-driving-bankruptcy.html> (accessed February 26, 2011); “Thomas Kinkade [sic] Gets Jail Time,” *KSBW.com*, December 19, 2010, under “Local News,” <http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Thomas-Kinkade-Gets-Jail-Time-112155759.html> (accessed February 26, 2011).

⁴⁴⁶ Kerry Lauerman, “This Week in Crazy: Thomas Kinkade,” *Salon.com*, June 19, 2010, http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2010/06/19/this_week_thomas_kinkade (accessed May 18, 2011).

art domains. A comprehensive language that simultaneously addresses the interests of both disciplines is necessary prior to comprehensively establishing resolute conclusions. Paradoxically, one cannot develop without first engaging in substantive dialogue.

The realization of such a program is not without its obstacles. There are two outstanding categories of impediments preventing academic interest in Kinkade as a subject of discourse - and the development of the derivative art/business language - that are most evident. The financial factors associated with the work are the aspects most disparaged by critics, but these very interests on the part of the art community impose the greatest barrier. Patrick Kinkade, a sociology professor and Thom's brother, is obviously biased; but his words ring true on many levels. "There's the critical art culture and the Everyman culture, and my brother is attacking the foundations of the critical culture's economy."⁴⁴⁷ Kinkade is commonly derided for the role his financial pursuits play in his "commercial" art-making, but the "fine art" market is an economic engine in itself. Every dollar spent on a Kinkade painting or print is a dollar usurped from the latter. To suggest that this reality has never crossed the minds of the big players in the art market would be naïve. One writer, after several disparaging paragraphs reviewing an exhibition of Kinkade's work, concurs: "Oh, and lest we get too holier-than-thou, who's to say that our own little corner of the cultural world--with its \$80 million Van Goghs, its blockbuster museum shows, its quasi-corporate, hierarchical gallery system, its bankable, no-risk artists and investor-collectors, and its rigged auctions, not to mention its sophisticated promotion schemes--is unaffected by

⁴⁴⁷ DeCarlo, "Landscapes by the Carload: Art or Kitsch?" *New York Times*.

commercial and corporate exigencies?”⁴⁴⁸

Artists like Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst intellectually undermined the art institution but never did so fiscally. The art market profited from their projects and careers, hence turning a blind eye to many of the underhanded insults transposed in the work. They and others like them may have feigned to jeopardize the station of the high-brow art elite, but the arbiters of taste never risked losing that status, because the artists never completely abandoned the system they challenged. Kinkade poses a more serious threat. Referencing Peter Clothier once again, he touches on the fragility of this exclusive art class, of which he includes himself, suggesting that it is the threat of self-realization the Kinkade exposes that creates indignation. “[W]e can hardly help but notice that what most truthfully characterizes the cultural values of our society is not what we find in our comfortable contemporary museums and galleries. There, we find only the reassuring validation of what remarkably few of us have conspired to call ‘art.’ The truth about our collective cultural values is much larger--and a whole lot less comforting.”⁴⁴⁹

The next obstacle - and worthy of more attention than I give it here - is the role of religion and its function in art, from the revered Christ-like image of the starving artist to the contradictory aversion to Christ-like values promoted in painting. Jeffrey Vallance addresses this phenomenon: “This is another area that the contemporary art world has a hard time with, that I find interesting...He expresses what he believes [spiritually] and puts that in his art. That is not the trend in the high-art world at the moment, the idea

⁴⁴⁸ Clothier, “Thomas Kinkade,” *Art Scene*.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

that you can express things spiritually and be taken seriously.”⁴⁵⁰ Bible toting artists are notoriously absent from the liberal art institution. *First Things* contributor Joe Carter questions the state of religion in contemporary painting, supporting the notion that the void is not simply a result of the market’s aversion to wealthy artists but rather a reflection of the art world’s distaste for art that espouses principles of Christianity. “No doubt many people who would praise a rich, popular, establishment-approved hack like Andy Warhol despise Kinkade for being a rich, popular, evangelical-approved hack.”⁴⁵¹ Religious art is not endorsed by the “New York art world cognoscenti.”⁴⁵²

The responsibility for Thomas Kinkade’s exclusion from serious academic discourse cannot not be assigned solely to the art community. The artist himself contributes to the contention with his own inconsistent views regarding his relationship to the institution. Evidence of this uncertainty is revealed through examination of Kinkade’s strongly fluctuating views on other artists and on his critical acceptance. His seemingly constant identity crisis is exemplified by overtly contradicting statements, which strongly condemn those with differing theories in one statement and praise them

⁴⁵⁰ Drohojowska-Philip, “Painted into a corner?,” 2004.

⁴⁵¹ Joe Carter, “Kinkade’s Cottage Fantasy,” *First Things*, June 23, 2009, under “First Thoughts” <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/06/23/kinkade%E2%80%99s-cottage-fantasy/> (accessed February 23, 2010). What Joe Carter overlooks, as do many critics of Andy Warhol, is that he was a practicing Catholic. I would argue that Joe Carter is correct, but that Andy Warhol was aware of the art world’s distaste for Christians in the contemporary art market. While not hiding the fact, he downplayed public awareness of his religiosity. Further, where Warhol and Kinkade might both be Christians, Warhol’s most recognized artwork was not “religious” – though he does have lesser known paintings of religious subjects in his body of work. Perhaps the contemporary art world is accepting of Christians, as long as religious orthodoxy does not overtly convey in the art. Andy Warhol and Jane Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum Publ, 2001).

⁴⁵² Ibid.

in another. One cannot expect the art world to endorse Kinkade if he vacillates about his own relationship to the market, whatever that position may be.

Kinkade's ambivalence is evidenced by his assertions regarding the contemporary art world. He refers to it with hostility, calling it an "outhouse" and characterizing it as "indecent, 'inbred,' and not in touch with America,"⁴⁵³ but also ruminates, "It is amazing that contemporary artists want to vilify me when I'm their greatest cheerleader."⁴⁵⁴ In an interview with Susan Orlean, his words are confrontational in tone. "Look at someone like Robert Rauschenberg. What's his Q rating? How many people have his art? A hundred? Where is the million-seller art?"⁴⁵⁵ In a different interview, he took the opposite position. "I've never been at odds with the world of contemporary artists," he says. "If there is any animosity, it's one-sided. Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg are among my favorites."⁴⁵⁶

Kinkade maintains his lack of interest in the educated, high-brow art scene and contends he has no interest in being included in this milieu. To the contrary, he agreed in 2005 to be involved in an exhibition at a university art gallery at Cal State University Fullerton in Santa Ana, California.⁴⁵⁷ Despite his purported disregard for the art establishment, numerous statements demonstrate his enthusiasm for the project. He is

⁴⁵³ Vallance, *Kinkade: Heaven On Earth*, 27.

⁴⁵⁴ Drohojowska-Philip, "Painted into a corner?," 2004.

⁴⁵⁵ Orlean, "Art for Everybody," *New Yorker*.

⁴⁵⁶ Grand Central Art Center: About Grand Central Art Center, press section on Kinkade exhibition curated by Jeffrey Vallance, http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/press_2004_4_4.php (accessed March 23, 2010).

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

quoted as saying, "It is flattering to think the paintings have cultural relevance at a level where critics might take it seriously."⁴⁵⁸ Should he wish to be recognized by the art community and actively participate in that culture, he will have to clarify his own position in that regard.

Modern art is frequently a target of Kinkade's, which he views as representative of much of what he disdains about the institution of art. He views modern art as chaotic, confusing, and even frightening and has on several occasions recounted the story a friend who grew up with Picassos (reproductions) on the walls and came to regard the adult world as scary and confusing.⁴⁶⁰ He also berates Picasso for creating artwork for money, stating: "I don't believe, in time, that he will be regarded as the titan that he is now. He is a man of great talent who, to me, used it to create three Picassos before breakfast because he could get \$10,000 each for them."⁴⁶¹ The apparent hypocrisy in his declaration is palpable.

Some of these contradictions can be attributed to Kinkade's well-defended ability to market himself - a skill that requires knowing your audience and acutely assessing and then delivering what your demographic wants to hear. This further exemplifies the challenges facing artists like Kinkade who aspire to achieve success in both the domains of art and business. These impediments hinder the potential for Kinkade's inclusion in academic discourse, without which, a comprehensive language will not develop for critics to employ in the consideration of him or similar artists who fall into this ambiguous and contradictory realm of entrepreneurial artists.

⁴⁵⁸ Drohojowska-Philip, "Painted into a corner?," 2004.

⁴⁶⁰ *Part 2 - Thomas Kinkade Prescott Event*, YouTube video.

⁴⁶¹ *60 Minutes*, interview with Morley Safer, 2001.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

So why do cozy cottages create such controversy? The objective of this research was to procure a more comprehensive awareness of the rationale supporting Thomas Kinkade's exclusion from academia in terms of both research and critical favor. Viscerally, it seems a foregone conclusion; but unsubstantiated arguments, limited to espousals on his commercial intentions and contrived aesthetic, suggest imprecision in the formulation of premises effecting his censure. The existence of artists who once found themselves in Kinkade's unfavorable position, but who are now deemed worthy of recognition for their contributions to the history of art, suggests there is a flaw immanent in the applied critical methodology.

In order to isolate factors contributing to this condition, I examined the contemporary criticism of four posthumous additions to the canon of art history for consistencies in their assessment patterns. The review identified the source of the deficiency as the comparative methodology. More specifically, it exposed the resulting limitations of the language employed in that problematic. Application of the existing nomenclature, dictated by and bound by current standards for aesthetic judgment, cast the unconventional art into a position of opposition. The art was consequentially regarded with irreverence, frustration, and even hostility. The inaccuracy in the corresponding language of valuation precipitated the critical process and conclusions reached through its implementation.

The consideration of these deductions as applied to Thomas Kinkade revealed analogous consequences of the enduring critical methodology. These include the lack of an adequate language for evaluation, the application of existing valuation tools, and the polarity created when art sits in opposition to the established rules of merit. This condition is exacerbated by the contradictory circumstances of the American artist evidenced by the inability within our current system to equitably address art that enjoys wide distribution, public visibility, and corporate sponsorship. Assigning value-laden classifications might simultaneously address the art and business domains, but only insofar as it excludes an artistic practice from the realm of fine art.

When academia debates theories that result in new “isms,” and a new associated vernacular evolves, art historians rescue artists from obscurity by retrospectively applying these new characteristics which reflect the current aesthetic trends. This has not yet occurred in the case of Kinkade. While several factors might be operating simultaneously to promote his exclusion, it is the lack of a comprehensive language of valuation appropriate to artists operating within the system of American capitalism that can be distinguished as the culprit of the poorly formulated, indefinite reasoning that justifies that exclusion. Without a critical methodology and language that engages the economics of art alongside the aesthetic considerations, art historians are restricted to only subjects within the existing paradigm. The art historian can only benefit from an awareness that liberates him or her from the prescribed directives determining the integrity of a subject, as evidenced by the incorporation of such subjects as graffiti, comic books, and even tattoos.

With more discourse on Kinkade, a more equitable language will develop that can be applied to other artists working in America, slowly dismantling the contradictory predicament in which they find themselves. There are recent developments in evolving capital markets that mitigate the disparity and suggest a shift toward resolution. For example, numerous universities in India offer degrees in “Commercial Fine Art,” or tout their other art degrees as leading to a career in the field, suggesting that “a course in commercial fine arts nurtures and aligns the creative energy in an individual and gives him the technical edge and finesse required to survive in the arts industry where competition is ever increasing.”⁴⁶³ The industry of art is conveyed as a relevant, respectable factor in the realm of fine art rather than a taboo which academicians evade. This cultural difference exists historically in other eastern cultures as well, which do not demonstrate the West’s aversion to the integration of commercial and fine art.⁴⁶⁴ Even in the United States, legitimization is subtly endorsed by Larry Gagosian, who opened a multiples gallery in Manhattan in the fall of 2009.⁴⁶⁵

Perhaps the jumping off point for discourse will originate in other disciplines to which Kinkade offers research potential. The psychology of the artist, as the reader has surely inferred, is an area of limitless, rich possibility. Kinkade could be a fundamental subject for a theological study of religion’s role in contemporary art. Philosophy also

⁴⁶³ India Education: One Stop Destination for Education Information. <http://www.indiaedu.com/career-courses/commercial-finearts/> (accessed April 20, 2011).

⁴⁶⁴ This applies particularly to Japan. See Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd ed., New York; New Jersey: Abrams; Prentice Hall, 2004.

⁴⁶⁵ Heidi Lee, “The Rise of Commercial Fine Art,” Whitewall magazine online, April 26, 2010, <http://www.whitewallmag.com/2010/04/06/the-rise-of-commercial-fine-art/> (accessed March 23, 2011).

provides areas for consideration, beyond just the implications for aesthetics. The relationship of Kinkade to the theories of Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Karl Marx would make a complex, engaging realm to explore. And, of course, he is essential in any comprehensive research into the business of art, which is the emphasis in this thesis. Still, it would be unfortunate to submit to other disciplines what could be a compelling subject of research for academicians of Art History and other members of the art community. Especially considering that he is, in fact, one of us.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW BY AUTHOR

Questions for Thomas Kinkade submitted via email on April 27, 2009 and returned with responses via fax on May 29, 2009.

1. When did you first realize you were the world's most collected living artist? Is that computed based on the number of prints you have sold? Do you have any idea what that number is?

Throughout my career I have been amazed at the emotional response to my paintings. This has translated into sales to everyday people. My passion always was to create art for real people, not some elite group that might happen to see it in a museum somewhere. If I created only the original paintings, then only people who owned and/or saw the original paintings would get a chance to experience it. By reproduction, I am able to expand the reach of my art into the lives of people who might experience it every day in their home or office or some other setting. Since beginning the process of publishing my work, it has been diversified into literally thousands of product categories. There is well over a billion dollars worth of art products sold over the last 25 years, and this translates into tens of millions of individual products. One of our licensees alone has roughly ten million names that have purchased some form of Thomas Kinkade product or art. We know that the total collector base numbers well in excess of 15 million and this translates into a tremendous number of daily impressions as people walk by and see these products. Unlike movies which are seen once and then put away or perhaps seen a handful of times over the course of years, a painting is seen every day, 24 hours a day. This allows it to be the equivalent of a flat screen TV that is tuned to one channel and continuously broadcasting. As I always say, it's like an advertising medium that you don't need to turn on and you can't turn off. In short, a Thomas Kinkade is a billboard in the home, one that goes on giving a message day-in and day-out. In my case, that message is a message of hope and inspiration, reminding people of the fundamental goodness of life.

2. Do you know how many separate images (not the multiples, but the originals) you have created since you began your professional career as an artist?

In the movie business alone I did over 700 paintings, and I have done well over 1000 images for galleries since. Add to that the thousands of sketches, drawings and minor works (oil studies, etc.) and the number of total pieces is in the many thousands.

3. What do you do with your originals? I have read that they go on tour every once in a while, but why have you chosen not to sell them? What are your plans for them?

The originals are safely stored in a concrete reinforced bunker vault in Northern California. This is a high security setting that allows the originals to be preserved for the

next generation. My goal has always been to utilize these originals for some form of public display. I feel art should be something available to all people. If I sold an original painting to an individual that would deny access to that painting to anyone expect that individual's friends, family and visitors.

4. What was the “vision” you persevered toward that so many people from your life speak about?

My vision has always been to use whatever talent I have to bless the lives of others. I think the standard paradigm is that artists “express themselves”. I have been suspicious of this model since it implies to me that “self” is the central operative motivator in the creative process. I flatly deny this presumption. To me the creation of art has always been about the sharing of experience with others – the sharing of ideas and emotions and personal belief. The first drawings made by primitive humankind in the caves of France were an attempt to capture the thrill of the experience of the hunt and document it for all to see. This fundamental motivation has not changed. I believe the vision for my art is to expand upon people's basic belief in home, family, faith in God, the beauty of nature, simpler ways of living, and the fundamental goodness of life. These are the aspects of the message that appeal to so many people. My paintings become an illustration of those fundamental beliefs.

5. By what do you measure your professional success? Do you feel you have accomplished it? What do you aspire to accomplish professionally in the years to come?

My success is always measured in terms of lives changed. Thousands of people make their living directly or indirectly selling my artwork in different forms, and their lives are touched by what I create on my easel. Furthermore, millions of others see the art everyday and gather some personal meaning or inspiration from it. Success to me is measured in the thorough growing breath of influence that a product created has. I also measure success in terms of the uniqueness of the creative vision expressed. In other words, working on a movie might be a collaborative process of creativity between thousands of people. Even the director might not fully claim credit for such things as the musical track, the individual camera shots, the lighting of the scene, the delivery of the actors' performance, etc., etc. So though me might say that a movie is an “Alfred Hitchcock” movie, the fact is it is a collaborative experience between many hundreds if not thousands of people. An artist can create as a very direct muse of personal expression. The process is unique to his or her vision, and that is one measure I give to true success – how unique and/or authentic is what you create. Is it authentically true to your personal vision, and were you instrumental in causing the creative act to occur. I create for the joy of it, and not just because I am employed to do so by someone else.

6. How do you respond to critics who feel your work is more of a commercial product than an artistic creation? Do you see the need for a differentiation between the two?

Critics have always been the unemployed artist of each era. Those who write criticism often had earlier aspired to create that same form of product. That is, movie critics probably wished at one point they could make movies, art critics wished they could have been artists, and music critics would love to make their living playing music. This isn't universally true, but it is true enough that you often find a spirit of resentment towards the success of others amongst critics in a given field. With the unprecedented success that my artwork has enjoyed over the years, I have been a natural target for critics who wish to denigrate the paintings and say, in essence, "since these paintings are so popular, they can't possibly be any good". I find that assertion to be patently absurd. Something that appeals to people may well be the highest measure of an artistic accomplishment. After all, being transported to another place through what someone else has created is one of the most genuine and powerful connections we can have with other people. A lot of art from the modernist movement sits in museums that are infrequently visited and the paintings have little or no lasting impact on the lives of others. I have had a lasting, perhaps lifelong, impact on the lives of millions. That is better than the random proclamations of any so called "professional critic".

7. Do you ever feel that the business aspect of your life has overshadowed your ability to paint or pursue other creative projects? Has that been a challenge?

No, business is a hobby of mine. I enjoy making money with my art, in the same way I enjoy planning hiking trips in the High Sierra. If I didn't enjoy it I wouldn't do it. Painting is always the top priority.

8. What aspects of the business world have been the most challenging?

I have always found it hard to be betrayed by people I have trusted. Our legal system allows for a travesty of justice wherein people who owe my company money, attempt to walk away from that payment, and then sue us with trumped up charges as a means of trying to get out of paying. Often times these have been people who on the surface seem to be supportive of my work and vision. That sense of betrayal has been very eye opening and at times disappointing. But as we all know, life's struggles make us stronger, and I have grown a lot through whatever challenges I have faced.

9. How does the existence of Thomas Kinkade "the brand" affect Thomas Kinkade "the person?"

My life is seamless, and I don't view myself in any special way because my name happens to be attached to countless products on a yearly basis. I often travel under a security name to avoid having my name recognized in public places.

10. Is the Robert Girrard website affiliated with you (www.girrard.com), or can you speak to the accuracy of information I have gathered from it? How, when, and why did you finally decide to reveal that identity? Would you ever consider creating another brush name?

I am not aware of all the websites that offer information about my work, and I can't authenticate claims made on any given website. I enjoyed painting under the Gurrard name because it gave me freedom to work in a different style. I certainly will use any brush names I choose in the future, if it serves my creative ends.

11. Why did you decide to take your company private? How has the direction of the company changed, if at all, since then?

Taking the company private was another way of affirming that my life and work are one. I didn't want to be part of a corporate machine, but rather a creative individual who can express himself through artwork, products, and any other way I choose.

12. Thomas Kinkade marketing is rather brilliant. Do you credit a team of people with that, or are most of the company's efforts dependent on your direction?

We have a great team, but I have always viewed myself in a way similar to the way Walt Disney viewed himself...that is I am the guy who goes around sharing ideas with others and drumming up excitement for projects. At the end, it's a team effort, but I certainly am part of it.

13. With the downturn in the economy, and assuming you have felt the effects of it, how have you and your company attempted to navigate the problem?

We have always been very responsive to market trends, and in a more challenging economic environment we have offered products that are more affordable to people. We will always have our elite categories of product to address the true collector, but we also believe it is important to get "entry level" product in the hands of many new collectors.

14. Do you ever feel that you have given up your freedom, your artistic license, by being part of a corporate entity?

No. I strictly control the rights to the images that I have created. Copyright law allows for the artist to create and then to use what he has created in the ways he chooses.

15. You must find yourself conflicted, at times, between your Christian values and the priorities of the corporate model. How do you reconcile the two?

I don't emphasize my personal belief system in the marketing process as much as I emphasize the joy and peace that you the consumer will gain from it. The fact that I have personal faith in a given direction is really private matter having to do with my own life. How I use my talents and my belief that God might use me, is a great motivator for me, but shouldn't be why people buy the art. People should buy the art because they personally enjoy it, and that it has meaning to them. If they give God credit for what they experience in the art, all the better. My heart has always been to work hard at

being good as an artist and not try to hammer people over the head with my personal belief system.

16. Do you have any future projects or exhibitions planned such as the one curated by Jeffrey Vallance?

None at this time, though I am excited about the potential of a retrospective museum exhibit sometime in the future. Who knows...perhaps you could curate it yourself!

NOTE: This interview was transcribed verbatim without any editing of punctuation or grammatical errors. Also, there were two questions submitted for which no response was included. They are as follows:

Do you hope your artwork will have a permanent place in art's history? And if so, how do you hope it will be regarded or remembered within that context?

Do you feel artwork needs to have a message? What is the message (if any) in your work? Is it the same now as it was twenty years ago, or has it changed?

VITA

KELLY L. DRUM MORAN

- Personal Data: Date of Birth: April 18, 1972
 Place of Birth: Eden, North Carolina
 Marital Status: Married
- Education: M. A. Art History, East Tennessee State University, Johnson
 City, Tennessee 2011
 B. S. Architecture, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta,
 Georgia, 1994
 Public Schools, Rocky Mount, North Carolina
- Professional Experience: Adjunct Faculty, Department of Art History, East Tennessee
 State University, 2010 - present
 Gallery Director, Scott White Contemporary Art, Telluride,
 Colorado, 2001 - 2006
 Board of Directors, Telluride Council for Arts and
 Humanities, Telluride, Colorado, 2004 - 2006
 Gallery Director, Apropos Fine Art, Telluride, Colorado,
 2000 - 2001
 Assistant Director, Artifacts Gallery, Bozeman, Montana,
 1996 - 1998
 Assistant to Coordinator of Tours and Docents and Outreach
 Programming, North Carolina Museum of Art,
 Raleigh, North Carolina, 1994 - 1995

Publications: "For the Love of Art: Barbara Betts." Shelter Magazine, Winter 2006.

"The Fine Art of Alpine Living: Why Five Artists Practice their Craft in the Mountains (Ron Patterson)." Elevation: The Magazine of Mountain Life, Winter 2001.

Awards and Honors: International Education Scholarship, East Tennessee State University, Office of International Programs, 2010
Study Abroad Grant, Ken Ross Architects, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2010

Graduate Research Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of Art and Design, 2008 - 2010

Governor's Certificate of Appreciation, North Carolina, 1995

Outstanding Freshman Architect Award, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991