

# Thomas Kinkade

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**William Thomas Kinkade III** (January 19, 1958 – April 6, 2012)<sup>[2][3]</sup> was an American painter of popular realistic, bucolic, and idyllic subjects.<sup>[3]</sup> He is notable for the mass marketing of his work as printed reproductions and other licensed products via the Thomas Kinkade Company. He characterized himself as "Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light," a phrase he protected through trademark but one originally attributed to the English master J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851).<sup>[4]</sup> It has been estimated that 1 in every 20 American homes owns a copy of one of his paintings.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Thomas Kinkade**



<b>Born</b>	January 19, 1958 <div>Sacramento, California, US</div>
<b>Died</b>	April 6, 2012 (aged 54) <div>Monte Sereno, California</div>
<b>Education</b>	Art Center College of Design, Pasadena <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Known for</b>	Painting

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## Early life

William Thomas Kinkade was born on January 19, 1958, in Sacramento County, California.<sup>[6]</sup> He grew up in the town of Placerville, graduated from El Dorado High School in 1976, and attended the University of California, Berkeley, and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.<sup>[1]</sup> He married Nanette Wiley in 1982, and the couple had four daughters: Merritt (b. 1988), Chandler (b. 1991), Winsor (b. 1995) and Everett (b. 1997), all named for famous artists.<sup>[1]</sup> He and his wife had been separated for over a year before his death in 2012.<sup>[7]</sup>

Some of the people who mentored and taught him prior to college were Charles Bell and Glenn Wessels.<sup>[1]</sup> Wessels encouraged Kinkade to go to the University of California at Berkeley. Kinkade's relationship with Wessels is the subject of a semi-autobiographical film released in 2008, *Christmas Cottage*. After two years of general education at Berkeley, Kinkade transferred to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

## Career

In June 1980, Kinkade spent a summer traveling across the United States with his college friend James Gurney. The two of them finished their journey in New York and secured a contract with Guptill Publications to produce a sketching handbook. Two years later they produced *The Artist's Guide to Sketching*,<sup>[1]</sup> which was one of Guptill Publications' best-sellers that year. The success of the book landed him and Gurney at Ralph Bakshi Studios creating background art for the 1983 animated feature film *Fire and Ice*. While working on the film, Kinkade began to explore the depiction of light and of imagined worlds. After the film, Kinkade earned his living as a painter, selling his originals in galleries throughout California.

### Artistic themes and style

A key feature of Thomas Kinkade's paintings are their glowing highlights and saturated pastel colors. Rendered in highly idealistic American scene painting values, his works often portray bucolic, idyllic settings such as gardens, streams, stone cottages, lighthouses and Main Streets. His hometown of Placerville (where his works are omnipresent) is the inspiration of many of his street and snow scenes. He has also depicted various Christian themes including the Christian cross and churches.

The fine-art world overwhelmingly derided Kinkade's work as little more than commercially successful kitsch.<sup>[8]</sup> Kinkade received criticism for the extent to which he had commercialized his art, for example, selling his prints on the QVC home shopping network. Others have written that his paintings are merely kitsch, without substance,<sup>[9]</sup> and have described them as chocolate box art<sup>[10]</sup> and "mall art."<sup>[11]</sup> In a 2001 interview, Kinkade proclaimed, "I am really the most controversial artist in the world."<sup>[12]</sup>

Kinkade said he was placing emphasis on the value of simple pleasures and that his intent was to communicate inspirational, life-affirming messages through his work. A self-described "devout Christian" (even giving all four of his children the middle name "Christian"<sup>[13]</sup>), Kinkade said he gained his inspiration from his religious beliefs and that his work was intended to contain a larger moral dimension. He has also said that his goal as an artist was to touch people of all faiths, to bring peace and joy into their lives through the images he creates. Many pictures contain specific chapter-and-verse allusions to certain Bible passages.

Kinkade said, "I am often asked why there are no people in my paintings,"<sup>[9]</sup> but in 2009 he painted a portrait of the Indianapolis Speedway for the cover of that year's Indianapolis 500 race program that included details of the diversity of the crowd, hiding among them the figures of Norman Rockwell and Dale Earnhardt. He also painted the farewell portrait for Yankee Stadium.<sup>[14][15]</sup> About the Indianapolis Speedway painting, Kinkade said:

The passion I have is to capture memories, to evoke the emotional connection we have to an experience. I came out here and stood up on the bleachers and looked around, and I saw all the elements of the track. It was empty at the time. But I saw the stadium, how the track laid out, the horizon, the skyline of Indianapolis and the Pagoda. I saw it all in my imagination. I began thinking, 'I want to get this energy — what I call the excitement of the moment — into this painting.' As I began working on it, I thought, 'Well you have this big piece of asphalt, the huge spectator stands; I've got to do something to get some movement.' So I just started throwing flags into it. It gives it kind of a patriotic excitement.<sup>[14]</sup>

Mike McGee, director of the CSUF Grand Central Art Center at California State University, Fullerton, has written of the *Thomas Kinkade Heaven on Earth* exhibition:<sup>[16]</sup>

Looking just at the paintings themselves it is obvious that they are technically competent. Kinkade's genius, however, is in his capacity to identify and fulfill the needs and desires of his target audience—he cites his mother as a key influence and archetypal audience — and to couple this with savvy marketing ... If Kinkade's art is principally about ideas, and I think it is, it could be suggested that he is a Conceptual artist. All he would have to do to solidify this position would be to make an announcement that the beliefs he has expounded are just Duchampian posturing to achieve his successes. But this will never happen. Kinkade earnestly believes in his faith in God and his personal agenda as an artist.

Artist and Guggenheim Fellow Jeffrey Vallance has spoken about Kinkade's devout religious themes and their reception in the art world:<sup>[17]</sup>

This is another area that the contemporary art world has a hard time with, that I find interesting. He expresses what he believes and puts that in his art. That is not the trend in the high-art world at the moment, the idea that you can express things spiritually and be taken seriously ... It is always difficult to present serious religious ideas in an art context. That is why I like Kinkade. It is a difficult thing to do.

Essayist Joan Didion is a representative critic of Kinkade's style:<sup>[18]</sup>

A Kinkade painting was typically rendered in slightly surreal pastels. It typically featured a cottage or a house of such insistent coziness as to seem actually sinister, suggestive of a trap designed to attract Hansel and Gretel. Every window was lit, to lurid effect, as if the interior of the structure might be on fire.

Didion goes on to compare the "Kinkade Glow" to the luminism of 19th-century painter Albert Bierstadt, who sentimentalized the infamous

Donner Pass in his *Donner Lake from the Summit*.<sup>[19]</sup> Didion sees "unsettling similarities" between the two painters, and worries that Kinkade's own treatment of the Sierra Nevada, *The Mountains Declare His Glory*, similarly ignores the tragedy of the forced dispersal of Yosemite's Sierra Miwok Indians during the Gold Rush, by including an imaginary Miwok camp as what he calls "an affirmation that man has his place, even in a setting touched by God's glory."<sup>[18]</sup>

## Authenticity

Kinkade's production method has been described as "a semi-industrial process in which low-level apprentices embellish a prefab base provided by Kinkade."<sup>[20]</sup> Kinkade reportedly designed and painted all of his works, which were then moved into the next stage of the process of mass-producing prints. It is assumed he had a hand in most of the original, conceptual work that he produced. However, he also employed a number of studio assistants to help create multiple prints of his famous oils. In other words, it is believed that Kinkade designed and painted all of his original paintings, but the ones collectors were likely to own were printed factory-like and touched up with manual brush strokes by someone other than Kinkade.<sup>[21]</sup>

Kinkade is reportedly one of the most counterfeited artists today. This is due in large part to advances in affordable, high resolution digital photography and printing technology. Additionally, mass-produced hand-painted fakes from countries like China and Thailand abound in the U.S. and around the globe. The studio says that Kinkade is the most collected artist in Asia but receives no income from those regions due to widespread forgery.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Business

Kinkade's works are sold by mail order and in dedicated retail outlets. Some of the prints also feature light effects that are painted onto the print surface by hand by "skilled craftsmen," touches that add to the illusion of light and the resemblance to an original work of art, and which are then sold at higher prices. Licensing with Hallmark and other corporations have made it possible for Kinkade's images to be used extensively on other merchandise such as calendars, jigsaw puzzles, greeting cards, and CDs. By December 2009, his images also appeared on Walmart gift cards.

He has also authored or been the subject of over 120 books and is the only artist to license his trademark and artwork to multiple housing developments.

Kinkade is reported to have earned \$53 million for his artistic work in the period 1997 to May 2005.<sup>[23]</sup>

At the height of his business, there was a national network of several hundred Thomas Kinkade Signature Galleries; however, they began to falter during the Late-2000s recession. In June 2010, his Morgan Hill, California, manufacturing operation that reproduces the art filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, listing nearly \$6.2 million in creditors' claims.<sup>[8]</sup> The company, Pacific Metro, plans to reduce its costs by outsourcing much of its manufacturing.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Criticism and controversy

### Business practices

Kinkade's company, Media Arts Group Inc., has been accused of unfair dealings with owners of Thomas Kinkade Signature Gallery franchises. In 2006, an arbitration board awarded Karen Hazlewood and Jeffrey Spinello \$860,000 in damages and \$1.2 million in fees and expenses due to Kinkade's company "[failing] to disclose material information" that would have discouraged them from investing in the gallery.<sup>[25][26][27]</sup> The award was later increased to \$2.8 million with interest and legal fees.<sup>[28]</sup> The plaintiffs and other former gallery owners have also leveled accusations of being pressured to open additional galleries that were not financially viable, being forced to take on expensive, unsalable inventory, and being undercut by discount outlets whose prices they were not allowed to match.<sup>[29]</sup>

Kinkade denied the accusations, and Media Arts Group had successfully defended itself in previous suits by other former gallery owners. Kinkade himself was not singled out in the finding of fraud by the arbitration board.<sup>[26]</sup>

In August 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the FBI was investigating these issues, with agents from offices across the country conducting interviews.<sup>[30]</sup>

Former gallery dealers also charged that Kinkade used Christianity as a tool to take advantage of people. "They really knew how to bait the hook," said one ex-dealer who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They certainly used the Christian hook."<sup>[31]</sup> One former dealer's lawyer stated, "Most of my clients got involved with Kinkade because it was presented as a religious opportunity. Being defrauded is awful enough, but doing it in the name of God is really despicable."<sup>[32]</sup> On June 2, 2010, Pacific Metro, the artist's production company, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, one day after defaulting on a \$1 million court-imposed payment to the

mentioned Karen Hazlewood and Jeffrey Spinello.<sup>[28]</sup> A \$500,000 payment had previously been disbursed.

From 1997 through 2005, court documents show at least 350 independently owned Kinkade franchises at its peak. By May 2005, that number had more than halved. Kinkade received \$50 million during this period.<sup>[28]</sup> An initial cash investment of \$80,000 to \$150,000 is listed as a startup cost for franchisees.<sup>[33]</sup>

### Personal conduct

The *Los Angeles Times* has reported that some of Kinkade's former colleagues, employees, and even collectors of his work say that he had a long history of cursing and heckling other artists and performers. The *Times* further reported that he openly fondled a woman's breasts at a South Bend, Indiana, sales event, and mentioned his proclivity for ritual territory marking through urination, once relieving himself on a Winnie the Pooh figure at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim while saying, "This one's for you, Walt."<sup>[34][35]</sup> In a letter to licensed gallery owners acknowledging he may have behaved badly during a stressful time when he overindulged in food and drink, Kinkade said accounts of the alcohol-related incidents included "exaggerated, and in some cases outright fabricated personal accusations." The letter did not address any incident specifically.<sup>[35]</sup>

In 2006, John Dandois, Media Arts Group executive, recounted a story that on one occasion six years previously, Kinkade became drunk at a Siegfried & Roy magic show in Las Vegas and began shouting "Codpiece! Codpiece!" at the performers. Eventually he was calmed by his mother.<sup>[34]</sup> Dandois also said of Kinkade, "Thom would be fine, he would be drinking, and then all of a sudden, you couldn't tell where the boundary was, and then he became very incoherent, and he would start cussing and doing a lot of weird stuff."<sup>[34]</sup> In June 2010, Kinkade was arrested in Carmel, California, for driving while under the influence of alcohol. He was convicted.<sup>[8][36][37]</sup>

## Related projects and partnerships

Kinkade was selected by a number of organizations to celebrate milestones, including Disneyland's 50th anniversary, Walt Disney World Resort's 35th anniversary, Elvis Presley's purchase of Graceland 50 years previously and the 25th anniversary of its opening to the public, and Yankee Stadium's farewell 85th season in 2008. Kinkade also paid tribute to Fenway Park.<sup>[38]</sup>

Kinkade was the artist of choice to capture the historic Biltmore House on canvas; he also introduced the commemorative portrait of the 50th running of the Daytona 500 in 2008.<sup>[38]</sup>

In 2001, Media Arts unveiled "The Village at Hiddenbrooke," a Thomas Kinkade-themed community of homes, built outside of Vallejo, California, in partnership with the international construction firm Taylor Woodrow. Salon's Janelle Brown visited the community and found it to be "the exact opposite of the Kinkadeian ideal. Instead of quaint cottages, there's generic tract housing; instead of lush landscapes, concrete patios; instead of a cozy village, there's a bland collection of homes with nothing—not a church, not a cafe, not even a town square—to draw them together."<sup>[39]</sup>

## Charities and affiliations

Kinkade supported non-profit organizations focusing on children, humanitarian relief, and the arts, including the Make-a-Wish Foundation, World Vision, Art for Children Charities, and the Salvation Army. In 2002, he partnered with the Salvation Army to create two charity prints, *The Season of Giving* and *The Light of Freedom*. Proceeds from the sale of the prints were donated to The Salvation Army for their relief efforts at Ground Zero and to aid the victims of the September 11 attacks and their families in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C. More than \$2 million was donated as a result of this affiliation.<sup>[40]</sup>

In 2003, Kinkade was chosen as a National Spokesman for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and during the 20 Years of Light Tour in 2004, he raised over \$750,000 and granted 12 wishes for children with life-threatening medical conditions.<sup>[41]</sup>

In 2005, the Points of Light Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to engaging more people more effectively in volunteer service to help solve serious social problems, named Kinkade as Ambassador of Light. He was the second person in the Foundation's 15-year history to be chosen as Ambassador, the first being the organization's founder, former

T.S. President George H. W. Bush.<sup>[38]</sup> During his Ambassador of Light Tour, Kinkade visited cities nationwide to raise awareness and money for the Points of Light Foundation and the Volunteer Center National Network, which serves more than 360 Points of Light member Volunteer Centers in communities across the country.<sup>[42]</sup>

Archbishop Mitty High School of San Jose dedicated the "Thomas Kinkade Center for the Arts."<sup>[43]</sup>

Kinkade was reportedly a member of the Church of the Nazarene.<sup>[44][45]</sup>

## Awards and recognition

Kinkade received many awards for his works, including multiple National Association of Limited Edition Dealers (NALED) awards for Artist of the Year and Graphic Artist of the Year, and his art was named Lithograph of the Year nine times.<sup>[38]</sup>

In 2002, Kinkade was inducted into the California Tourism Hall of Fame as an individual who has influenced the public's perception of tourism in California through his images of California sights. He was selected along with fellow artists Simon Bull and Howard Behrens to commemorate the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and the 2002 World Series. He was also honored with the 2002 World Children's Center Humanitarian Award for his contributions to improving the welfare of children and their families through his work with Kolorful Kids and Art for Children.<sup>[38]</sup>

In 2003, Kinkade was chosen as a national spokesperson for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. In 2004, he was selected for a second time by the Christmas Pageant of Peace to paint the National Christmas Tree in Washington, D.C. The painting, *Symbols of Freedom*, was the official image for the 2004 Pageant of Peace.<sup>[38]</sup>

In 2004, Kinkade received an award from NALED recognizing him as the Most Award Winning Artist in the Past 25 Years. In 2005, he was named the NALED Graphic Artist of the Year. He was also recognized for his philanthropic efforts by NALED with the Eugene Freedman Humanitarian Award.<sup>[38]</sup>

## In popular culture

In Heath and Potter's book *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*, Kinkade's work is described as "so awful it must be seen to be believed."<sup>[46]</sup> In Dana Spiotta's 2011 novel *Stone Arabia*, the main character's boyfriend, an art teacher at a private school in Los Angeles, gives her presents of Thomas Kinkade Painter of Light pieces. "When I asked him why Thomas Kinkade, he just said, 'Well, he is America's most successful artist. And a native Californian as well.' Or he would say, 'His name has a trademark — see?'" and he would point to the subscript that appeared after his name. "The pieces are "deeply hideous" and "kitschy," but for some reason she loves them."<sup>[47]</sup>

In the popular Fable franchise a painter exists by the name of Thomas Kaidkin, a reference to Thomas Kinkade.

Mat Johnson's 2011 novel *Pym* includes a parody of Kinkade named Thomas Karvel, "the Master of Light."<sup>[48]</sup>

A self-produced movie about Kinkade, *Thomas Kinkade's Christmas Cottage*, was released on DVD in late November 2008. The semi-autobiographical story looks at the motivation and inspiration behind his most popular painting, *The Christmas Cottage*. Jared Padalecki plays Kinkade and Marcia Gay Harden plays his mother. Peter O'Toole plays young Kinkade's mentor, who tells him, "Paint the light, Thomas! *Paint the light!*."<sup>[49][50]</sup>

## Death

Kinkade died in his Monte Sereno, California home on April 6, 2012. It was reported following autopsy that he died of "acute intoxication" from alcohol and Valium.<sup>[51]</sup> He was 54 years old.<sup>[2][52]</sup> According to Amy Pinto-Walsh, his girlfriend of 18 months, Kinkade had been at home drinking the night prior to his death.<sup>[53][54]</sup> His wife, Nanette, had filed for divorce two years earlier and was traveling in Australia with their daughters. His family initially said he appeared to have died of natural causes.<sup>[2]</sup> Pinto-Walsh stated that the artist "died in his sleep, very happy, in the house he built, with the paintings he loved and the woman he loved."

He is survived by his wife Nanette and their daughters Merritt, Chandler, Winsor and Everett. He also has a brother, Dr. Patrick Kinkade, who is an associate professor and chairman of the Criminal Justice department at Texas Christian University.<sup>[55]</sup>

Following Kinkade's death, his wife Nanette sought a restraining order against Pinto-Walsh, to prevent her from publicly releasing information and photos with respect to Kinkade, his marriage, his business and his personal conduct that "would be personally devastating" to Kinkade's wife.<sup>[56]</sup> In December 2012 Nanette Kinkade and Amy Pinto-Walsh announced they had reached a secret settlement in their feud involving his multi-million dollar estate and other issues.<sup>[57]</sup>

He is buried at Madronia Cemetery in Saratoga, California.<sup>[58]</sup>

## See also

- Combella-Blair House

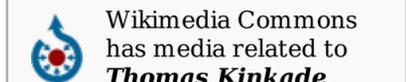
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