

Art Dialogue in the Classroom

This article is the first in a series of articles giving suggestions for guiding group interpretation of current artwork. In each article, I will briefly discuss purposes, format, and classroom atmosphere for guided conversations. I will then provide some background information on a specific artist and/or artwork. Finally, I will offer questions. The questions are not necessarily intended to be used directly in your teaching, but instead are a means for a facilitator to find his or her own questions and lead students into finding theirs. I welcome comments and suggestions at connie.stewart@unco.edu, 970 351-2426.

The Purpose of a Group Discussion is More Questions

My most valuable experiences looking at a picture are not those times when I understood it but those times when I didn't. Sometimes, often unexpectedly, the experience is an encounter. I am confused or comforted, confronted or challenged. In those most memorable times, I leave the artwork wanting to know more. Often my encounter with an image has been because of a dialogue with a fellow viewer. What I thought I saw was questioned by someone else and their insights stimulated my thoughts. Frequently, the "fellow viewer" was a student participating in a discussion that I was leading. Here are a few suggestions for leading class discussions that allow the teacher and the students to explore their own questions.

Use a mixture of literal, inferential, and evaluative questions

Literal questions have a right or wrong answer. They are useful to establish groundwork for the general discussion or groundwork for a specific question. Sometimes I use a few simple literal questions to encourage a quiet group to speak.

Inferential questions do not have a right or wrong answer. Instead a respondent can formulate and defend an answer by observations about the artwork or from previous research.

Evaluative questions ask for an informed judgment. They can be judgments of formal artistic merit or propose hypothetical changes in the artwork. (Would you like the image if it were twice as big? Would you like the image if it had more cool colors?) Evaluative questions can also precipitate discussions on morality and values. (Is it fair to sign an artwork with your name when it was completed with the

help of others in your workshop?) Questions defining "art" are often evaluative discussions.

Let participants know that most of the questions you ask are truly questionable. You do not have an answer already in mind that they need to find. In fact, you, as the questioner, do not know the answer to your questions.

Encourage participants to respond to another's answer with "I agree because" or to respectfully say "I disagree because." Teach participants that a response of "I disagree" is a compliment to the value of the idea expressed. It is worthy of discussion.

Discussing the Art and Business of Thomas Kinkade

Images of Thomas Kinkade's works can be found at: <http://www.thomaskinkade.com/>.

For the first discussion, I have chosen an artist who is familiar to many: Thomas Kinkade. Thomas Kinkade creates art for a mass audience and as part of a corporate empire. At one time, Thomas Kinkade was the only painter whose work was traded on a stock exchange. Serious collectors could become shareholders in Media Arts Group, a publicly traded company dedicated to producing and circulating works of Thomas Kinkade. In the 1990s, his company was listed in Forbes magazine as a Top Ten company to watch. The company began as Lightpost Publishing in 1989, went public in 1994, and was bought back by Kinkade in 2004. There is some controversy over the company, the relations between Kinkade Gallery owners and Media Arts, and the buy back that returned Media Arts from a public to a private company. Owners of gallery franchises have accused the company of unfair business dealings, but Kinkade and the company have denied the accusations.



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The company has successfully defended itself against several lawsuits. A recent arbitration board decision, however, awarded a settlement against Media Arts — Kinkade himself was not singled out for fraud.

Kinkade has been financially successful. It is estimated that he earned 53 million dollars from 1997 to May 2005. He has painted several hundred original paintings. However, his art empire is not built on selling his original paintings but on selling multiples. Purchasers can buy individually numbered, framed lithographs on canvas, with highlights hand painted by workers “under the supervision of the artist,” Kinkade himself. Certain reproductions have the Thomas Kinkade signature applied in DNA-infused ink, establishing authenticity. In addition, his prints are sold in a variety of size, frame, and price options. Purchasers can also buy Kinkade night lights, golf gear, scarves, linens, wallpaper, and many other household items. His name and work are used in licensing agreements with other products such as La-Z-Boy furniture and Hallmark cards. Kinkade claims that one in every twenty American homes has a Kinkade item in it. He not only markets items to decorate the home but began a project creating the homes themselves. In 2001, a subdivision of Kinkade-inspired homes with narrow streets and picket fences was begun in California.

Thomas Kinkade’s website lists his prints by subjects: Bridges, Churches, Cityscapes, Cottages, Estates, Gardens, etc. No matter what the subject, his paintings can be recognized by his signature otherworldly glow. He proclaims himself “The Painter of Light™” and has trademarked the phrase. He considers his work “populist” because it “takes images people understand and creates an iconography for our era” (Weintraub, p.18). His website proclaims his message as one of simple pleasures, inspirational messages, and “inherent life-affirming values” (www.Thomaskinkade.com).

The following questions are intended to stimulate other questions. Not all of the questions are appropriate for every classroom or every discussion. Find something that is useful to start a conversation with the fellow viewers in your classroom. Listen carefully to the responses to find the next question. Hopefully, new ideas and new questions will develop during the discussions.

Where have you seen a Thomas Kinkade reproduction?

Does he appeal to certain generations, ethnicities, or other groups of people?

Do you think one in twenty American homes has a Kinkade?

Why is his work popular or do you think his popularity is overrated?

Does the ubiquitous marketing of Kinkade products indicate good business strategy for artwork? Does it devalue the art and create kitsch?

When someone buys a lithograph “touched up” by another artist, are they buying true art? Is it important that the person adding the original touches is “trained by” or “supervised by the artist?”

Is buying a Kinkade a good investment? If you were buying an expensive print, would you want a DNA-infused signature on the work? Why?

Is he painting light? Is his light the same as the light of the Impressionists?

Is his work “pretty?” If so, describe the colors, shapes, and composition that he uses to make a “pretty” image. Do you like “pretty” art?

Kinkade claims that he is successful because he uses imagery people understand. What does a viewer understand? Do you understand images that are simply familiar? Is it important for artists to use imagery people understand? Is good art the opposite of good taste?

What are some of the settings for Kinkade’s paintings? What country? What time period? Could they have actually existed at some time or in some place? What don’t Kinkade images show (e.g., broken bridges or overgrown gardens, dangerous weather, modern annoyances, etc.)?

Does art lie when it only shows the good? Is all art a lie? What makes a truthful picture?

Kinkade also claims to be depicting “American pastimes and values.” Does he? Did Norman Rockwell have the same purpose? Are the two artists similar?

Is Kinkade trying to be “classic?”

Kinkade claims to create “an iconography for our era.” What is “an iconography for our era?” (Hint: What images do you remember when you think of Classical Greece, the Renaissance, the 1930s, the 1950s, etc.? Are the remembered “icons” a true representation of what life was like at the time?)

Would an iconography for our era include simple pleasures and inspirational messages? What is the value of such a message? Is there harm in such a message?

Some critics think that claiming that something is applicable to everyone is a product of a false sense of

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European superiority. Do you agree? Does Kinkade's success negate this criticism?

Would you buy a Kinkade-inspired house? Would you expect the subdivision to be successful? Can a neighborhood recreate the pictures?

Kinkade has received humanitarian awards and, in 1993, was the national spokesperson for the Make-a-Wish Foundation, but there have been recent reports of Kinkade behaving inappropriately while drinking. Should Kinkade's personal or business life affect the way his art is appreciated?

Do you think a Thomas Kinkade painting inspires or exploits?

Weintraub, L. (2003) *In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Art*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers.

