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Popular Taste in Art as Related to Culture

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Senior Inquiry

We surround ourselves with visual art, from decorative mirrors and billboard ads to bedroom posters and hotel prints. These various genres of everyday art fall across a wide range, but many relate to or are inspired by institutionalized art. Those who already tend to visit or are inclined towards art museums are usually the ones who gain exposure to museum art, which often caters to their taste, but are still receptive to changes in the art that reflect our world and time period. One of the more major, recent movements in formal art is postmodernism, which developed from resisting societal bounds and corruption soon after World War II. A closely related movement is Dadaism, which immediately preceded postmodernism and was a direct reaction to the horrors of World War II and the American social structure of the time. Though both popular and institutional art have, especially recently, been directly involved with social affairs, museum art generally goes somewhat unnoticed by the public while art in the popular eye seems to follow a trend often unexamined by the art community. As the art community becomes more and more separated from general society, popular art and museum art need to both be considered significant, especially since there are still some universal trends in the purely visual pieces of current visual art. But although there seem to be some common traits in visual art from all genres that appeal to most observers, the popularity of certain artwork in the US and UK among all types of consumers has generally been determined by the immediate relevance and appeal of its social impact.

One view of current taste in art suggests that people prefer relaxing, possibly repetitive artwork that doesn't require them to think, a view often propounded by elitist art critics but also supported by empirical research. Martin S. Lindauer's study, "Mass-Produced Art: Towards a Popular Aesthetics," classifies a certain form of visual art that is often nondescript but important to classifying popular taste. He characterizes popular art as imitative, "representational, realistic,

and traditional," and adds, ""genuineness" is often achieved through a slavish use of thick and textured pigments ("impasto") and obvious brushstrokes ("painterly") to insure that it is indeed "real art."" Lindauer draws attention to the balance consumers of mass-produced work, and by extension their artists, strike between standard, consistently appealing work and the importance conferred on new, uncommon works of what is often considered truer or more supposedly legitimate art. While it is possible that inspecting how purposefully uncreative artists synthesize apparently unique aspects of the work may not seem to explain specific aspects of popular taste, the fact that the works considered by Lindauer are inexpensive, have various forms of access, and sell well suggests that the qualities of these pieces are appealing to a large part of the population – as Lindauer comments, it may "throw some light on traditional aesthetic concerns, such as "What makes art liked?"" As a result, it explains a general taste found in this time period that is not limited to certain groups. In addition, "unlike other forms of popular art… mass-produced art is similar to museum art" (Lindauer, p. 58-59). Lindauer emphasizes the usefulness of analyzing mass-produced art in his study as it does have a significant market.

Popular art is often treated as less significant in understanding the taste of a time period but is rather essential - apart from reaching a wider population than museum art does, trends in its sales and popularity indicates what draws consumers' eyes and seems to deserve an (even slight) investment. Elizabeth B. Silva's work, "Distinction through visual art," measures differences in popular preferences for different genres of art, finding that differences in taste are minimal, which extends an "omnivore thesis" or "the taste for everything" (143) applied to music that "distinctions between more popular and legitimate tastes have become blurred" (141) in the case of contemporary Britain (Silva, 2006). She alludes to the second function mentioned of analyzing popular art, that it reflects a sense of value to consumers, as she notes some fairly

stable patterns are in the pieces chosen by consumers who own anywhere from between one or two pieces picked up from a local market to significant collections of artwork. Therefore, taste in mass-produced art may indicate something about modern museum art as well as popular taste. This perspective, that people have a generally consistent interest in art accounted for by visual appeal, is supported by more scientific approaches. A study by Daniel J. Graham and Christoph Redies, "Statistical regularities in art: relations with visual coding and perception," shows that there are regularities in the most obvious aspects of art across genres and in how people respond to them. Popular taste appears almost predictable.

Though consumer taste may be somewhat static, the works people choose tend to have personal impact. Lindauer states that "the two kinds of art [mass-produced and museum art] also have educational, propagandistic, and moralistic functions" (1991). Each of the three functions relates to either museum or popular art. The first, a "nostalgic evocation of an idyllic and untroubled past," is observed in Julia Mason's analysis of the work of popular artist Thomas Kinkade.[1] She seems to be a proponent of Kinkade and the deeper value of his commercialized, intentionally superficial work. According to Mason, "Kinkade credits his overwhelming popularity to his accessible, romantic themes largely inspired by his Christianity" (807). By appealing to a mostly Christian and conservative audience, Kinkade's works serves a "moralistic" purpose (1991). Fans quoted in the article seem to have a deeply emotional connection to his work, justifying enormous collections of his works with straightforward explanations such as ""I like the color that he uses, and I like the way that he uses the light, and I like the subjects that he paints"" (Mason, 812). Such gut-level attractions to his paintings often arise from the social context of his consumers; they are mostly concentrated in America, and

[1] Kinkade is the artist behind a long line of often holiday-themed paintings and products with a highly recognizable style that has been widely criticized by the art community. His works are often evocative of comfort, filled with an unearthly light and composed of repetitive and flawless subjects, such as snow-covered trees and houses.

Cindy, quoted above, lives in "a home that very well may represent the norm for middle-class America" (Mason, 812). It is no surprise that some conservative and religious values that are associated with the large, middle-class. Christian American population are emphasized in Kinkade's work.

Mason characterizes his work as a backlash against the irrelevance of contemporary art to the average consumer and the art world's perceived elitism. Thomas Kinkade is the creator of visual pieces that are so popular as to have become an integral part of our culture. A quick Google search of his work brings up Christmas-card style images that have become so common they are rarely associated with Kinkade without some research. His marketing goes even farther: he has even created housing developments that mimic his images. Mason focuses on the "reactionary" aspects of his cookie-cutter Christmas posters and commercialized "experience" (Mason, 60). His line of products complete his purpose of providing an escape from daily life by making it better, serving both a "propagandistic" function (Lindauer, 1991) by its blatant commercialism and Kinkade's own goal of creating a refuge for his audience. Notably, his work is also meant to imitate 19th century work (found to be the most common form of mass-produced art by Lindauer), which constantly appeals to both the art community and the public (though in different senses), though Kinkade's work only attracts a following among those who already identify with his values. Interestingly, impressionism and landscapes are two most preferred types of art among the sampled British population in Silva's study (47.3% liked landscapes "the most" while 9.3% liked Impressionism the most; 148, Silva, 2006), which both influence and are present in Kinkade's work.

While Kinkade's art seeks a sense of comfort, the postmodern art community often insists that in order to be valuable, art must "challenge viewers' expectations… disengage from

consumer culture, or… critique institutions and belief systems" (Mason, 809) (hoping to further research Mason's reference to Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*). This often sets up a contrast with "mass-produced art" and work such as Kinkade's. Kinkade's fans also consciously reject the occasional vulgarity and lack of emphasis on aesthetics found in movements such as Dadaism, which is again based in their social context. However, like Kinkade, Dadaism and postmodernism did not completely reject consumer culture (one artist mentioned was extremely wealthy). Futurism, another more formal art movement which appeared shortly before the first World War, also allowed for praise of modern times. According to the Tate Museum, it was "an art that celebrated the modern world of industry and technology" over the "weight of past culture" (Tate, n.d.). Formal postmodern movements also involved both bringing art closer to life and 'annihilating the self' in order to escape life and its demands, which echoes Kinkade's own artistic goals. In addition, Dadaism, in its rejection of modern society, seems to have in common the "[evocation of a] way of life that is removed from the present in time and place" (Lindauer) with mass produced art. Both popular and museum art, in these cases, base major aspects of their importance in how they respond to society, and in these similar ways attract their supporters.

While the two forms of art treat viewers very differently in some senses, there are similarities in their intent. Both involve escapism and a new way to experience life, in a sense – Kinkade has developed housing developments, essentially his own villages, for consumers to completely withdraw into the world of his paintings. Although Kinkade makes a point of not being elitist, his work still only immediately appeals to people who already identify with his values (Christian, modest, sentimental, idealistic), while Dada and other postmodern artwork is aimed at those who want to be free of "corrupt and nationalist politics, repressive social values,"

and other issues after World War I (MoMA). Despite the apparent superficiality of mass-produced or commercialized work, and the chaos of Dadaism and some other postmodern art movements, the meaning of these contemporary art forms lie in the overall intent – Kinkade tries to spread "the light of love" (Mason) while Dadaists try to "blur… the boundaries between art and life" (Tate). These are direct appeals to their viewers, who seem to miss the fulfillment of such goals (sentimental tendencies and freer ways to experience modern life, respectively). The question of whether museum and popular art are really so different may be laid to rest as Mason argues,

> Traditionally, we have viewed this escape as an escape from conservative norms and traditional values. But what happens when a discourse embraces postmodern sensibilities that question traditional norms and values, which, in the context of art, rejects established standards of aesthetic excellence? (810)

The answer seems to be a cycle of questioning whatever social or cultural structure may be in place, especially in the postmodern era, which leads to similar social impacts for both popular and museum art.

It follows that the popularity of art – museum, mass-produced or otherwise – is determined by its individual relevance to its viewers by reflecting their ideals and creating something new that releases them from societal pressures they may feel. This addresses both art world and general public, which seem to be much divided despite having from the same original culture and historical context. It seems that Kinkade and the contemporary art he tries to reject have a few elements in common, which helps characterize current popular taste as a whole. For instance, both involve a certain distance between the true importance of the work and what is in the piece itself. Kinkade blatantly markets his work and uses contemporary art's supposedly

closed-off nature as a selling point for himself, as well as his Christian values, in order to relate to his audience. Postmodernism is said to be intended as "a liberation from… feeling… since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" and Dada created "not [as] an end in itself . . . but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in" (812). Both movements challenge modern social structure in order to save their people, while Kinkade aims to remove his viewers from a world that they would wish away if they could (somewhat like postmodernists). Both genres recognize a kind of chaos in the world around them, and though they try to react in opposite directions, they eventually aim for a sort of release from or transformation of this chaos.

The two types of art, popular and museum, also involve a certain kind of emptiness – Kinkade purposefully avoids new/demanding material in order to provide a 'retreat or refuge' for his audience, while Dadaists, as mentioned, try to remove themselves from the work and through it, a corrupted society. This goal is also somewhat present in surrealist work, which was another reaction to the horrors of a World War (specifically WWII). The beginning and significance of these historically important movements lie in their social impact. Mason's article on Kinkade mentions that his paintings appeal to people who wish to avoid the shock factor of contemporary art – they really do not mean to leave their comfort zones, which is often attacked in postmodern art. However, a different social motivation explains postmodern artists' aim of shaking up ideals. The appearance of Surrealism/Dada both after World Wars was probably correlated to the huge changes in society and attention on destructive political and social structures. As a result, these ideals were considered corrupt and in order to overthrow them, artists had to expose their ugliness and corruption. The reaction to these works can be found partially in works such as Kinkade's, the popular appeal of Lindauer's mass-produced art, and the appeal of 19th century

‘establishment’ work in Silva’s study. When consumers can and want to relate these two, by allowing themselves to connect with and react to all forms of art, they are not alienated the way they are said to be in the Kinkade article. Studies of mass-produced art and general aesthetic suggest artists could create endless, formulaic works that should appeal to most consumers but for consumers to invest in the way they did for Kinkade and the Dada art movement they require some kind of society-based motivation or greater meaning. Consumers thus bring this meaning into their lives in the works they choose and the environment around them.

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