



Art that's simply GOURD-geous



Mark Hoffmann in his home studio

Art has been in Mark Hoffmann's DNA since he was a little kid. "I can't remember when I didn't draw or do *something*," he said. And while he's always loved to draw Disney characters, what he puts them on has changed over the years.

He's experimented with mediums over time, including painting on wood and on Disney vinylmations figurines, 3-inch or 9-inch vinyl figurines with Mickey Mouse-shaped heads. "Disney created these things blank," he said. "They came with markers and the kids would draw on them. Then all of a sudden, all these artists got ahold of it, and then it just kind of blew up."

While he painted on vinylmations for a long time, he eventually he came to favor gourds—those hard-shelled fruits often sold alongside pumpkins. Some varieties can be eaten, but they can also be dried and used to make items such as musical instruments, utensils and decorative objects.

Why gourds? "People ask that all the time," the retired San Jose, CA Branch 193 member said. "It's really funny, because I used to do all these drawings and couldn't sell anything."

So, the artist and illustrator took what he was drawing on paper and vinylmations and put it on a gourd instead. "It just kind of took off," he said of his business. "So many people paint on paper and canvases—I didn't see anyone that really painted on gourds like that."

He realized that the shape was similar to a snowman, so he began making some gourd snowmen as gifts, but they didn't sell well at first either, Hoffmann said.

Then, "a couple of years ago on Facebook, somebody posted [a snowman] that they had and said, 'I got this from Mark 15 years ago.' All of a sudden, it just snowballed," he said. He's been making art on gourds ever since.

They're lifelong keepsakes, Hoffmann said, adding that they stay beautiful from year to year. "I have some that are almost 25 years old and still look the exact same as the day I painted them," he said. "People are really surprised at how durable they really are."

He begins by cleaning the dried-out gourd, sanding the hard shell and spraying it with a coat of white primer. He then creates the design with acrylic paint and then seals it with a finish.



From l: Candy corn-themed gourds, a vinylmation of Ursula from “The Little Mermaid,” as well as ostrich and other large Easter eggs. Below: One of his drawings on paper

Creating on gourds isn't the same as on paper. “Sometimes you've got to draw it on there differently just because of how the shape is, because it's not like a flat piece of paper. You've got to go with the movement of the gourd,” he said.

Hoffmann employs an assembly-line approach when doing many pieces at once in his home studio—a converted bedroom—but the time it takes to complete each design varies. A Santa or snowman can be completed in a day, but more detailed scenes can take up to a week, he said, adding, “It just depends. Now I have a whole lot more time because I'm retired.”

Hoffmann, who retired in April 2023 after 22 years delivering mail, devotes time to his art seven days a week. When inspiration strikes, he can keep it going into the morning hours. “Sometimes you get painting, and you could paint till 2, 3 in the morning,” he said.

He mixes it up for holidays, such as painting on ostrich and goose eggs for Easter, and he painted poison apples and candy corn on various shaped gourds for Halloween last October.

While Hoffmann creates bulk orders of crowd favorites, he also takes commissions, which range in price from \$75 to \$500, depending on complexity. “A lot of people have the Santas and the snowman, so I'm kind of changing it up,” he said. “Right now, I'm working on one that has some California poppies on it that's a custom order for someone.”

He posts his creations on Facebook, accessible at markhoffmann.com, as well as on his Instagram feed at [@mjrhoffmann](https://www.instagram.com/mjrhoffmann). “A lot of times, people just order off of what I post,” he said. His art has received international attention too, garnering requests from Denmark, Australia and Switzerland, and he's had many repeat customers. He's also begun attending craft fairs as a vendor to sell more.

One of his most memorable commissions is from a woman to paint a memorial gourd for her father, featuring cars that he loved. “But I'll try anything,” he said. “And I always say, ‘I'll send you a drawing first and then we'll tweak it if it needs to be.’ I mean, I wouldn't want to buy something if I

didn't know what it was going to look like.”

For major holidays, he creates coloring pages for youngsters—or adults—to decorate. And three years ago, he illustrated a children's book, *Little George and the Christmas Socks*, for an author from New York.

“He was another Disney collector

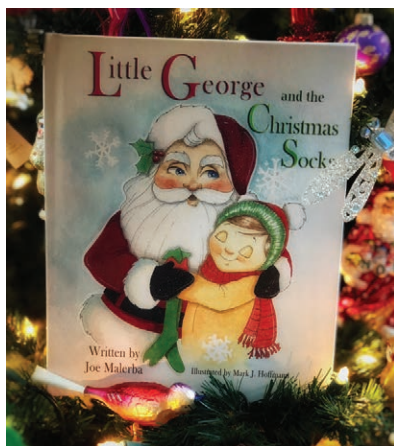
and he found me through my Facebook page,” Hoffmann said. “He said he was looking for an illustrator, and I sent some ideas and some drawings, and he hired me.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, he made yard signs with a little mushroom character that said, “Stay strong! Together we will get through this!” to

help spread hope in his community and to raise funds for those in need. The signs got so popular that Hoffmann then printed the image on greeting cards, T-shirts and other items. He also painted small rocks with messages of inspiration. “I would just drop them and leave them along the trail wherever I walked, and people were finding them,” he said.

Hoffmann wants to keep his art hobby just that—a hobby. “I don't want it to get so big that I can't keep up with it—but I always have a waiting list of people,” he said.

“You have to be careful, because then it becomes a job, and I think it loses something. I do it now because I love it. Even if no one saw it or bought it or anything, I could probably still do it,” he said, before adding with a laugh, “but it is nice when they buy it.” **PR**



Hoffmann created the artwork for *Little George and the Christmas Socks*.

