

# The Value of Art

An Interview with Gregory Johnson,  
Artist

**EDITORS' NOTE** Born in Chicago, Gregory Johnson studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and at museums throughout Europe before earning bachelor's and master's degrees at Illinois State University. Since moving to Georgia in 1981, the painter, sculptor, and original printmaker has exhibited at galleries and museums throughout the United States. His works can be viewed on his Web site, [www.gregoryjohnson.biz](http://www.gregoryjohnson.biz).



Gregory Johnson

**Is there an understanding in the corporate world about how to use art to capture the tradition or heritage of a company?**

That is a wonderful question. The answer in my opinion is absolutely no. The corporate world is just beginning to see the value of art. Let me give you some practical examples. *Field Trip* is a bronze composition of a group of six children and a teacher at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. This sculptural grouping is the most photographed attraction in the garden. All these little kids are mirroring the sculpture, and they're getting their picture taken. Then they go home and show the photos to their friends. They're creating interest, free advertising, and are generating attendance. Now consider the sculpture of the college students on the bench at Northwest Missouri



State University, which was commissioned to mark the school's centennial year. It's one of the most photographed places on campus. The kids from China, Thailand, Bangkok, Kenya, Brazil, Japan, and so on sit on the bench with their arms around the sculptures. Those photos go back to those countries and represent the school. Or, consider the Golden State Foods Foundation in Irvine, California: Its mission is to raise money for charities and to help challenged children.



industry, such as the foundry where my sculptures are produced. The bronze, the gas necessary to melt the metal, and all the other utilities associated with it are what everybody is trying to contain and manage efficiently, because so

much of the cost is there. For me, going green means showing the way. I'm showing the way by sculpting things, children, and people which suggest teamwork and help out Mother Nature, such as the little boy who, with his sister's help, is putting up a birdhouse that has fallen.

**It's obvious that sculpting is your passion and you do it because it's something you truly love. Did you ever imagine that you would create some of the pieces that you have?**

It's like a daring risk-taking adventure that your parents and your loved ones tell you not to do, because you are going to starve. But the other part of the adventure is the clients. The clients who come to me have rich and varied backgrounds, and they come from all over the world. What they bring to the table are things that I never would have sculpted, but they tell me what they want to do, and then together we discover the best way to present it. I'll go back to the sculpture of the kids for Golden State Foods. What I was given was a little strip of paper with an image of the kids, which was probably a year old when I got there and already on brochures and promotional material all over the United States. I thought the sculpture couldn't be done that way, but the die was cast, and the company needed something that fit the die. I said that we needed to do a bench, with some kids seated, one kid kneeling, one kid standing on a little girl's leg, and one little boy standing to the side. Now everything lined up just like the photograph. The bench was the fundamental design keystone of the piece. So we worked it all together, and it came out exactly right. ●

So the foundation decided to create and sell little miniature versions of a sculpture of five kids on a bench. The concept is for people to get one for their corporate boardroom, office, desk, or conference table. And they get to tell people, yes, we support the Golden State Foods Foundation. This ends up in the corporate literature, brochures, and advertising mailers. It's a testimony of sorts. It shows the good that the foundation is doing, and I don't think you can buy that.

**How do you create awareness about your art?**

I sort of have a multilevel marketing program. At the very top of the pyramid are the hundreds of bronzes I have out there on street corners and in plazas, parks, and gardens. They're advertising my good name 365 days a year. And everybody in sales knows that you have to prospect the market, so I have an ongoing prospecting and marketing program where I mail out at least 1,000 pieces of mail a year. It's all quality stuff that introduces the product. Then I have what I call the electronic marketing stuff. That is the Web site. I also have an e-mail newsletter. And then finally comes advertising in leading magazines. It is very difficult to advertise in magazines that are successful, because basically they price themselves out of an artist's reach. To some degree, I roll the cost into the cost of my product, but there's a percentage, and I think somebody out there said it's 10 percent. So my advertising budget is roughly 10 percent.

**We hear today about the focus on the environment and on being green. Is that affecting the way you produce your work?**

First of all, in the studio, I have always been conscious of the utilities. We've always tried to manage with good quality windows and cost-efficient furnaces and air conditioners. There are the same issues in the metal-making

*One of several pieces collectively called UGA Fieldtrip (left) Sharing and Caring, built for Georgia Power Southern Company (top left) Golden State Foods Foundation Kids (below left) and Nature's Little Helpers (top right)*