

# The New York Times

## *Mickey Turns 90, and the Disney Marketing Machine Celebrates*



The Walt Disney Company will celebrate Mickey Mouse's birthday with a prime-time ABC special on Sunday, "Mickey's 90th Spectacular." Credit Eric McCandless/ABC

**By Brooks Barnes**

Nov. 2, 2018

LOS ANGELES — A two-hour prime-time special on ABC. Cupcakes the size of cars at Disneyland Paris. Collaborations with a dozen fashion designers, [including Marc Jacobs](#). More than 30 books, including one from Taschen so big it comes with a carrying handle.

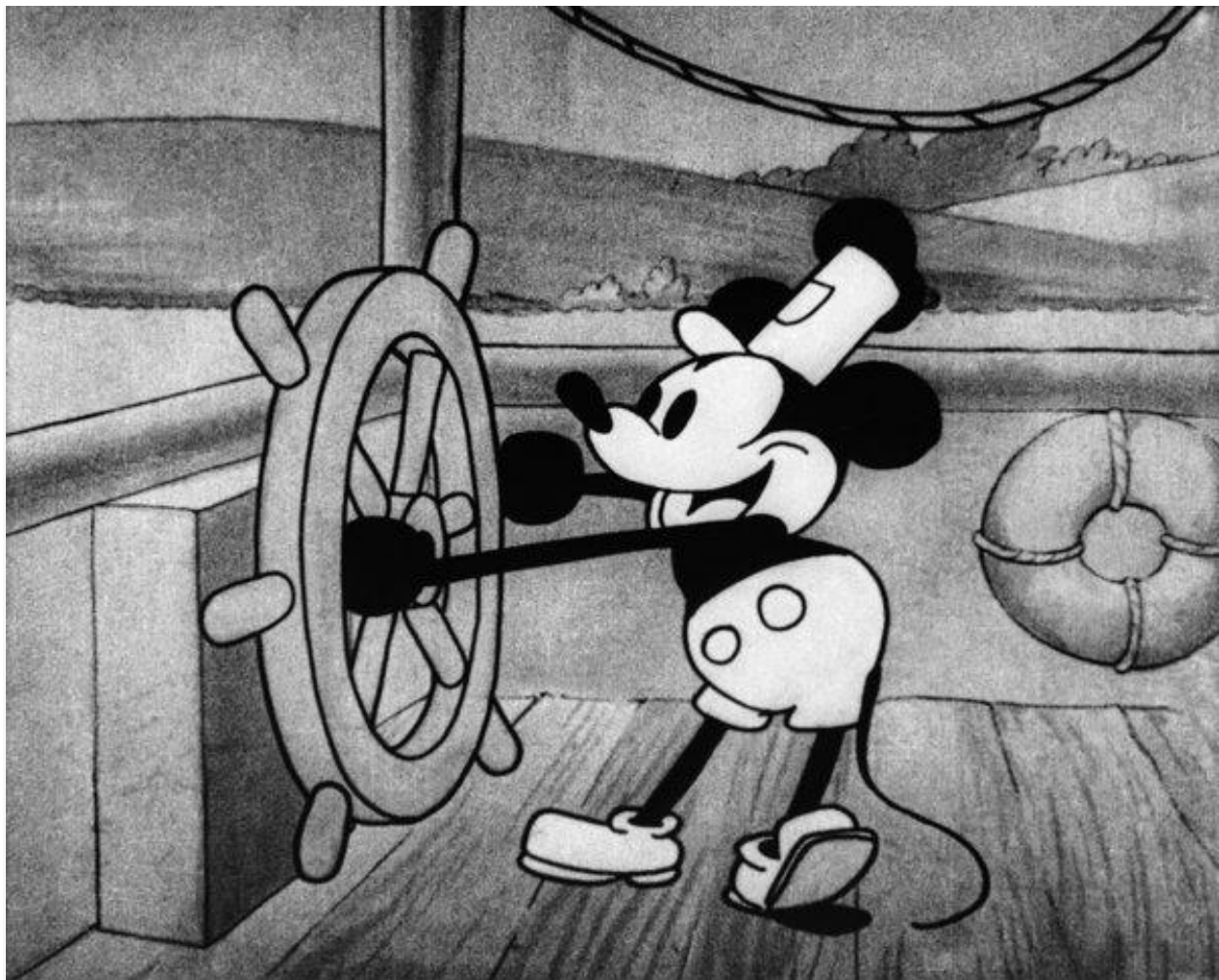
Small and subtle are not the Walt Disney Company's style. But a new effort to focus attention on one of its oldest characters, Mickey Mouse, is truly something to behold.

Disney is using Mickey's 90th birthday as a monstrous marketing moment, with the company's cross-promotional machine revved up to what may be its highest level yet. Every corner of the \$168 billion company is contributing to the campaign, which will



Disney has billions of dollars in merchandise sales to consider. Mickey and his friends (Minnie, Pluto, Goofy) make up Disney's top-selling consumer products franchise, generating annual retail sales of at least \$3.2 billion, according to The Licensing Letter, a trade publication. That tally does not include the Disney Store chain or outlets at Disney's theme parks. Disney does not disclose sales information, although a spokeswoman said the franchise had been growing both domestically and overseas.

There are challenges, however, the result of a shifting retail marketplace (the [demise](#) of the Toys "R" Us chain) and declining television viewership. Disney's child-focused cable channels are important Mickey engines, serving up animated specials, shorts and series. Mickey also has strong competitors in the preschool market – ["Paw Patrol" on Nickelodeon](#), for instance.



"Steamboat Willie," a 1928 short film directed by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, was Mickey's first movie appearance. Credit Disney

"The challenge for any character, but especially for Mickey since he's so historic, is maintaining relevancy," said Marty Brochstein, a senior vice president at the International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association. "And the adults are

almost more important than the kids in that way. The grown-ups decide what the money gets spent on.”

Here are some of the components of Mickey-palooza:

## Mickey the Muse

Associating older characters with of-the-moment artists is a tried-and-true way to demonstrate relevancy. That strategy appears to be part of the thinking behind “[Mickey: The True Original Exhibition](#).” This Disney-created exhibit, running Thursday to Feb. 10 in a 16,000-square-foot space in Manhattan, features Mickey-inspired creations by contemporary artists like Amanda Ross-Ho, Shinique Smith and [Daniel Arsham](#).

“With the scale of Disney and who Mickey Mouse has become, a lot of people forget that Walt Disney was a real artist,” Mr. Arsham said in a statement. “Being able to make my own mark on his legacy is a real dream.”



The artist Daniel Arsham is celebrating Mickey with his signature style of stretching figures along a wall. Credit Arsham Studio

Tickets to the exhibit cost \$38, and some time slots are already sold out. Darren Romanelli, a Los Angeles designer [who works as DRx](#), served as curator.

## Prime-Time Takeover

Fifteen dancers in formation. Drummers dangling from wires over the stage. Indoor fireworks. And the actress Kristen Bell, who [provided Anna's voice](#) in “Frozen,” positioning Mickey as bringing “a much-needed warmth and reliability in a world where consistency is something hard to come by.”

So begins “Mickey’s 90th Spectacular,” a two-hour special on Disney-owned ABC on Sunday night. Produced by Don Mischer, whose credits include Super Bowl halftime shows and multiple Academy Awards ceremonies, “Mickey’s 90th” features performances by Josh Groban, Meghan Trainor and the [K-pop group NCT 127](#), among

others. Presenters include Robert A. Iger, Disney's chief executive, who personally oversees the Mickey brand.

"We wanted to celebrate how this little character transcends boundaries," Mr. Mischer said by phone after the taping. "He's an everyman who sometimes fails but keeps trying. Who can't relate to that?"

But it was tricky to find the right tone, said Charlie Haykel, another producer. "We didn't want a history lesson," he said. "And we didn't want it to turn too sentimental." Image



Disney is collaborating with a dozen designers, including Marc Jacobs. Credit Marc Jacobs, via Disney

## Stickers for Everyone

Mickey's popularity has remained remarkably stable over the years, according to Henry Schafer, executive vice president for the Q Scores Company, which measures the

popularity of celebrities, brands and licensed properties. A springtime poll by the company showed that 26 percent of the United States population ranked Mickey as a favorite cartoon character, far above the average. Mr. Schafer said Mickey's appeal was particularly high among Latinos, 39 percent of whom said he was a favorite.

Disney's vast theme park operation is one reason the squeaky-voiced rodent has remained so embedded in the culture. The parks, which attracted more than 150 million visitors last year, offer the masses a touch point — quite literally. Walking-around Mickey's sign autographs and pose for photos.

For the current campaign, the Disney parks will stock commemorative merchandise, sell "limited edition" desserts and host a dizzying number of events billed as the [World's Biggest Mouse Party](#). Hong Kong Disneyland will hand out birthday stickers to guests as they enter, for instance, and Disneyland Paris has those colossal (inedible) cupcakes on display. Starting in mid-January, Disney World in Florida will introduce a Mickey-focused "street jubilee."

## What About Minnie?

Poor Minnie. Always in the shadow of her boyfriend. But Disney has not left her out entirely.

She dances with Mickey on the ABC special and is front and center in the Mouse Party theme park events. Disney also arranged for her to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. (Mickey got his 40 years ago.) The sidewalk plaque was [unveiled in January](#) by Mr. Iger and Katy Perry, who wore polka dots in the character's honor.

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Image



Minnie Mouse got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in January. Mickey got his 40 years ago. Credit Albert L. Ortega/Getty Images

“To this day, no one rocks a bow, the color red or a dot quite like her,” Ms. Perry said at the time. “Trust me. I am trying.”

In recent years, Disney has put Minnie forward as a style icon, [dispatching her](#) to New York Fashion Week and arranging for Minnie-inspired collections or garments from Coach, Vans, [Diane von Furstenberg](#) and other fashion brands. Those efforts have increased Minnie licensing revenue considerably.

But the numbers are the numbers: Mickey has about [14.2 million](#) followers on Facebook, while she has [4.8 million](#).