

ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

SURVIVING WHILE CREATING

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CANDIDATES CLEARANCE FOR ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

I have completed and filed the original term paper in Art History in the Art Department office and I have given a copy to the course instructor.

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Private patronage and church-related commissions supported artists in history before the nineteenth century. Since the nineteenth century, the salons brought art out of the predominantly religious and portraiture realm. However, the artists were also left without much of their financial support. The gallery system for today's artists is structured very much like the salons of the nineteenth century in that both rely on sales for their success.

There are many tradeoffs an artist must endure in order to make art. For most artists, the obsessive need to create will be activated in the most complicated lifestyles. My interest in wanting to know what is available to artists today inspired this topic. The three main areas of focus are artists who teach in the university, show options available, and financial funding.

The research for this paper was obtained from sources that are currently involved in the system. Interviews of gallery owners, instructors established in the university, artists pursuing teaching careers, and artists awarded grants and fellowships. Newspaper and magazine articles provided me information that was realistic and practical to what some of the options are for individual funds in the visual arts.

Bruce Beasely, a sculptor, wrote these words of advice that put artists' career choices into perspective:

My most sincere advice is to take a hard look at your desires, your abilities and your temperament, and then pick the solution that is least repugnant . . . The best part is the art you are going to make. The negative part is that somehow you have to get some money in order to do it. And believe me, there are no perfect solutions.¹

Artists Who Teach

One area that many artists find to be the best compromise for making art and a living is teaching at the university level. Today's standards require a Master of Fine Arts to teach art at this level.

Depending on the area of concentration, the school that one chooses can be an important factor in the advancement of a teaching career. Certain schools have reputations, prestige, and name recognition that can help the job search. Less prominent schools are usually more affordable to students, but do not have a reputation to boost their credibility.

James Dormer, chairman of the Department of Art at Colorado State University, believes that the most important aspect of an applicant is his or her artwork. But the next thing a hiring committee looks at is where the candidate went to school.² An applicant from Yale or Stanford is going to have an advantage.

The market in university teaching is highly saturated today. In the 1950s, 1960s, and even the early 1970s, if one graduated from Iowa with a printmaking Masters degree,

one was guaranteed a teaching position. Iowa's reputation stemmed from Mauricio Lasansky, who was the head of Iowa's print program in those years.³

Most students pursue their graduate studies at a university other than where they obtained a Bachelor's degree. Obtaining both undergraduate and graduate degrees from the same university may be inhibiting one's growth as an artist and limiting the possibilities of different outlooks and experiences, which are vital in shaping ideas and enthusiasm in art.

After spending between two and five years obtaining a Master's degree, there is the process of securing the necessary two to three years' college teaching experience outside graduate school. The options available are located at the university. Many instructors take one-year sabbatical leaves that universities fill by hiring temporary instructors. Most universities have a continuing education program that requires college-level instructors in many disciplines, including art. Both of these options enable one to slowly build experience in college teaching. However, the pay is usually inferior and the benefits are sometimes dropped.

Another important place to look for teaching positions is the College Art Association. The CAA provides members with position listings and placement facilities at an annual conference held in major metropolitan art centers across the country. It brings together the universities and colleges

that are hiring with the numerous applicants who are looking.

"It's a meat market!" is how Steve Simons described the conference. The competition is fierce because the market is so saturated.⁴ Simons has been to the CAA conference the last two years and plans to go again next year. He claims that even though it is one of the most degrading ordeals to go through, it still provides important interviews and contacts that are vital to the process of getting a full-time teaching position.

To get involved with the CAA conference, one must first become a member of CAA. During the year, CAA will send job listings in college teaching. When one applies for jobs, mention is made to the employer that one will be at the CAA conference and would like to make an appointment to meet with him or her there.

Many jobs are not listed in the CAA bulletins, so it is possible to get some interviews at the conference, but it is better to have as many interviews arranged in advance as possible. Many applicants will attend the conference with no guaranteed interviews and will try to make contact at the conference.

Simons noted that while he was attending the CAA conference in Boston, one employer merely glanced at his résumé to see where he attended school. Simons believes it does make a difference to many employers where one gets his or her degree.⁵

On a smaller scale than the College Art Association, there are regional branches that hold similar types of conferences. One such organization is the Mid-American College Art Association that covers thirty-five states from Texas to Canada.

Apart from being a source for jobs, these conferences also provide informative lectures and panel discussions on varying aspects of art and education. From this tradition, there has emerged conferences that are not necessarily job placement centers, but concentrate on the problems and interests of liberal arts and education. The School of Visual Arts in New York City started such a conference in 1987. These types of conferences will provide insight and understanding to an oftentimes frustrating field.

Aside from the process of employment, we must also look at the concerns and problems of being an artist in a university. The most important concern an artist has in this field is that teaching becomes a consuming aspect that stifles creative energy. It is important for the individual, as well as the institution where he or she is teaching, to have a balance between the two. One must be a sensitive artist as well as a prolific, informed instructor.⁶

Artist Ben Shahn writes about this highly debatable notion of an artist surviving creatively in a university environment from an artist's perspective. He observes these problems artists have in academic situations:

While I concede that almost every situation has its potential artist, that someone will find

matter for imagery almost anywhere, I am generally mistrustful of contrived situations, that is, situations peculiarly set up to favor the blossoming of art.

And, in summarizing, states:

So I believe that if a university's fostering of art is only kindly, is only altruistic, it may prove to be also meaningless. If, on the other hand, the creative arts, the branches of art scholarship, the various departments of art are to be recognized as an essential part of education, a part without which the individual will be deemed less than educated, then I suppose that art and the arts will feel that degree of independence essential to them; that they will accept it as their role to create freely--to comment, to outrage, perhaps, to be fully visionary and exploratory as is their nature.⁸

In some cases, the university can inhibit one's growth as an artist, but in others it complements their artistic involvement. I believe an artist must be aware of this before deciding to teach and should not only look at the financial stability, but what it is to be a university teacher and what it is to be an artist. There is a place for artists in the university. Shahn enforces this by stating:

I believe that creative art is eminent in the university hierarchy of values. But teaching itself is so largely a verbal, a classifying, process that the merely intuitive kinds of knowing, the sensing of things which escape classification, the self-identification with great moods and movements in life and art and letters may be lost or obliterated by academic routine. They are not to be taught but rather absorbed through a way of life in which intensively⁹ developed arts play an easy and familiar part.

These excerpts from The Shape of Content by Ben Shahn enforce the importance that an artist teaching must be sincere and sensitive to pass on what creating means without

falling into a formula that stops being enthusiastic and truthful.

Show Options

Even though creating art is an obsessive act that will be carried out under any circumstances, there is still a desire and a necessity to have work shown. Early on in an artist's career, whether one is a student or not, it is important to enter juried exhibitions. These shows are the first step in establishing a show record.

Juried exhibitions are as varied as the different media used in making the art. The shows are most often juried by slides. The artwork that is chosen from the slides is sent in by the artists to undergo a final selection process.

The shows an artist decides to enter should be considered carefully by reviewing the prospectus to see who the juror is and the eligibility requirements. This process of showing is very unpredictable. One piece of work entered in five different shows could be rejected four times and accepted once. There is no way to determined what will be accepted.

This process of juroring shows intrigued me enough to conduct an experiment in my graduate printmaking seminar. A random selection of slides were chosen by a nonparticipant for a mock print show. About thirty slides made up the total entries that the jurors were to consider for the show. The jurors needed to choose a show of ten to twelve prints out of the thirty entries. Eight participants juried the

slides with eight very individual results. No two shows were the same. Only two slides were chosen unanimously by all the jurors.¹⁰ This experiment emphasized the notion that perhaps taste is a major factor in juroring shows.

There is no problem with personal taste being the deciding issue, because as a juror, one must react in a personal way to the work and must satisfy one's own beliefs and priorities to select the best work. There are no formulas in art making and there should be none in the selection process.

Other possible places for showing work are the private- and public-funded nonprofit art centers and galleries. Rosalyn Spencer, director of the Power Plant Visual Art Center in Fort Collins, Colorado, cites two important functions an art center serves: one is to provide a space to show contemporary art and the other is to educate the community about contemporary art. The best way to achieve those goals is to do group shows. That way, a gallery can show more artists and also expose the community to more variety.¹¹

Although a community art center has an obligation to the public, it also serves artists well as an exhibition center. In order for an artist to start selling his or her work, it helps to establish a reputable show record. The private nonprofits assist an artist's credibility.¹²

Another nonprofit exhibition alternative is the cooperative galleries. The artists own the gallery as a group

for a place to show their work. In some ways, a cooperative can inhibit an artist's growth. Artists cannot be totally objective about their own work. If an artist controls what and how his or her work is shown, it could become counter-productive if he or she is not competing in the market.¹³

The advantages to a cooperative gallery are that one always has a place to show one's work. The motivation of this type of gallery is creation, not sales, so there is much more freedom to work experimentally and take risks that a sales gallery could not afford to chance, such as performance pieces or installations.

There are thousands of artists looking for gallery representation each year and so it is very difficult for most artists¹⁴ to gain access to the private gallery system.

Paul Hughes, owner of the Inkfish Gallery in Denver, Colorado, put the competition into perspective. He said that at least once a day an artist will either stop in or call his gallery wanting to show his or her work. Hughes says he is always looking for good work and he is glad to take a look. Out of the numbers that come in, he usually will only take on one artist a year and has between twelve to fifteen that he carries on a regular active basis.¹⁵

Theresa Ray, assistant of the Kyle Belding Gallery in Denver, Colorado, told a similar tale in terms of numbers of artists approaching the gallery, but of a different procedure. For practical reasons, the Kyle Belding Gallery reviews slides of potential artists once a week. The objective for this is to get a feel for the work without the

artist being present.¹⁶ The gallery gets about fifteen propositions a month. Of this number, only about three percent are considered serious work of good quality. They may take on one new artist a year.¹⁷

By taking on an artist, or if the gallery and the artist agree to carry the work, the procedure is usually as follows: The artist will first be introduced by sharing a part in a major show. There is no publicity for the introduced artist, except to mention the artist's name on the show's announcement. A few pieces are left in the gallery for the reactions of clients and the public and to consider a future show. If all goes well, a show will be scheduled.

There are many things to consider before plunging into a relationship with a gallery. It will do the artist no favors if the gallery is not completely supportive and enthusiastic about his or her work. The two parties must be like a good marriage. One needs to know what the gallery's priorities are. Is the dealer placing more importance on the financial angle or the growth of the artist's work?

In most sales-orientated galleries, the money from sales is split fifty-fifty. It may help the artist justify this cut if he or she thinks of the gallery as rendering services to sell his or her work. Tibor de Nagy, gallery owner in New York City, wrote about the gallery's position:

The artist has to be convinced that for all the dealer's promotional work, advertising, printing expenses, exhibitions, and placing of artworks in other shows, and--last but not least--the tremendous expense of the overhead needed to keep the gallery going, he has to take such a cut.¹⁸

This same idea of a combined effort of both parties is reiterated by Paul Hughes. He claims that after the work itself, personalities are the second most important factor to consider before taking on a new artist. It's like a marriage, but divorces do happen when either party is not in agreement. Hughes has no written contract with the artists he represents unless the artists insist on one. He feels a contract is not necessary if the marriage is a good one. Hughes believes that letting the artist grow is most important.¹⁹

No matter where or with whom the artist shows his or her work, there is one important characteristic for which most gallery owners, directors of private nonprofit spaces, and the artists themselves constantly look. First, a body of work which shows a consisting growth. Secondly, an artist who works in series or has some connecting aspect to the work. It has been stated over and over that the artwork is the most important and the only access to galleries, alternative spaces, or juried competitions.

Financial Resources

The state-level funding for individual artists is as varied as the states themselves. Most states have an art council for some of the funding, whether it is for individual artists, public work projects, or arts organizations.

The Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities channels federal and state funds into the state arts economy as grants to individuals, organizations, and programs. The

grants to individuals in the visual arts awarded this past fiscal year (since July 1, 1987) were eight grants of \$4,500 each in the areas of painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography.²⁰

In the state of Minnesota, aside from government grants, an important boost to financial support to artists is the many privately-funded grant programs. St. Paul artist and recent grant recipient, David Madzo, credits Minnesota's financial support to large companies like 3-M and Dayton-Hudson.²¹ The families of these companies have provided grants such as the Jerome, which is for emerging artists; the McKnight for established artists; and the Bush for career artists. The categories are to gear applicants toward the fellowship which is best suited for where the artists are at with their work. There is no order in which an artist must apply for any of these grants, but students are not eligible. The money is for art to be produced, not to finance a degree.

The amounts an artist can qualify for is anywhere between \$5,000 and \$30,000. Madzo feels grants are a very worthy aspect in an artist's developing career and for the community an artist works in. Much of the money received will be generated back into the community by purchasing materials and supplies.²²

Another aspect of available state funds is public artwork, either commissioned directly from a particular artist, or in most cases, chosen from a competition open to

any local artist. Many states have adopted a one percent art solution where one percent of city building construction budgets is set aside for art.²³

The procedure for such a program in Colorado is that all artists are required to register slides of their work and their résumé at the Boulder Public Library.²⁴ The Colorado Artists Register contains more than thirteen hundred professional visual artists living in Colorado. There is no charge for artists to register or other interested individuals to view the slides. The register gives the Colorado Council of Arts and Humanities a constant source for the number of artists available statewide.

The task of this type of competitive funding, private or public, is bureaucratic and time-consuming. It involves giving away too little money for too many people.²⁵ If an artist receives an award, however, it all becomes worth the waiting and paperwork.

The largest and one of the most prestigious grant programs is the National Endowment of the Arts. One of the roles of the NEA is to grant money to individual artists. Many artists refer to receiving an NEA fellowship as "making it," because of the prestige and boost to an artist's reputation.

Some artists may be tempted to feel there is some trick involved in getting accepted, that perseverance in applying year after year will reward one's efforts. This is rewarded

only if there is apparent growth and dedication that shows in the work. The artwork must speak for itself.

There is no deadline for NEA artists' fellowships, since this agency believes an artist should apply whenever he or she feels ready. When the artist applies, his or her application and slides, or video, of his or her work will be reviewed by a panel. The review panel is selected by the NEA based on its knowledge and experience in the arts and its ability to endure the long selection process. The competition is fierce; again, there are too many qualified applicants for too few dollars.

Receiving an NEA fellowship makes a number of things possible for an artist. An artist can drop everything and concentrate on art-making for a year, working uninterrupted and with as few distractions as possible.²⁶ Most importantly, a grant allows an artist to devote his or her time to doing major work at a point when that artist is ready.

To summarize, the major concern for the artist always is the quality of his or her artwork. There is never a substitute for excellent work. Every other detail and move on the art market game board must come after and according to the quality of art that has been made.

An artist must decide what his or her priorities are, whether it be teaching, fame, money, family, or just survival. There are no perfect solutions, and every artist must decide what will allow him or her to survive while creating at the peak of his or her abilities.

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