

washingtonpost.com/jobs

Search Over 15,000 Jobs

Post Your Résumé

Get Job Email Alerts

Talk to Career Experts

JOBS

washingtonpost.com/jobs

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 2004, K1

CAREER TRACK

Advice for Twentysomethings

When Art Is Your Passion but You Still Need a Paycheck

By MARY ELLEN SLAYTER
Washington Post Staff Writer

Poet T.S. Eliot was a banker. Novelist Walker Percy was a doctor.

Do you think they were ever bored at work?

Few people make a living at fine art or literature. That means the day job is a must for most artists, and many of them resent it. "If only I could escape this cubicle," they lament, "my art could be really something!"

Maybe they are right. For many people, the very definition of success as an artist is making a living at it. They dream of focusing their energy solely on their art. They imagine themselves walking upstairs to their well-appointed studio to get to work, instead of hopping on the Metro to a cold office downtown. Ah, wouldn't that be the life?

But for many other serious artists, keeping craft and commerce separate has a certain wisdom. In fact, some artists even do it on purpose. Think about it: As nice as it sounds to make a living from your art, getting paid carries an obligation beyond the perfect aesthetic—you know, to the people writing the checks. "How does this look?" can morph rather quickly into "Will this sell?" Forget creative whims—you're now guided by the whims of your roof and your car's alternator.

In other words, once you start doing it for the money, you might start Doing It for the Money.

A self-employed artist is just that—*self-employed*. It's a business. If you expect to make a decent living, most of your time will be given to marketing, promotion, meeting with clients. Sounds a lot like your stifling day job, doesn't it?

So what *does* make a good day job for an artist? Here are the major



BY ROLLIN MCGRAIL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

things to consider:

■ **Flexibility.** If you're in a band, for example, you'll likely need time off to tour. Find a paying gig where you can work part time or with generous unpaid leave policies. Ultimately, temping may be your best bet. Ideally, you could do enough work for the agency that you'd qualify for benefits. They don't usually have great health insurance, for example, but it's better than going without or trying to pay the whole cost yourself.

■ **Downtime.** Some jobs are mostly reactive. Your duty is to sit there until something goes wrong. Until then, you can read, sketch, make outlines. Even if most of your co-workers are watching TV and goofing off on the Internet, that doesn't mean you have to. Security guards and certain tech support positions come to mind. A recent

contributor to my online chat was complaining about how bored he was at work, how little he had to do most of the time. Find that guy. Steal his job.

■ **Money.** Creative expression is often an expensive hobby. The problem is that the jobs that give you flexibility and lots of downtime won't likely pay you well. Visual art supplies are particularly expensive. If that's your passion, consider working at an art supply store. The value of the discount you'll get will be worth far more than the extra few dollars per hour you could earn working an office job instead of retail. The Corcoran College of Art and Design practically serves as a staffing agency for the local art supply industry.

■ **Practice your craft.** Most fine arts

have a commercially viable cousin. Poetry may not profit, but ad copy sure does. Andy Warhol was a graphic designer. (Of course, some art snobs will tell you he never stopped being one.) Teaching others the basics of your craft can also put decent money in your pocket, and help build your reputation as an artist. Depending on your inclinations, your clients can include adults or children. You can work at schools or give private lessons.

■ **Take a break.** Another alternative is to pick something completely unrelated. If you're worried that working with words all day will leave you too exhausted to craft that Great American Novel, pick a job where you don't have to read anything beyond your to-do list that day. Work with your hands. Acquire a skilled trade, like plumbing or painting. Walk dogs or clean houses.

And the next time someone snidely remarks that you should keep your day job, you can tell them, "Thanks, I think I will."

Background Color

Did you grow up blue-collar and now have a white-collar career? Do you feel like the differences between you and your mostly middle-class-born colleagues cause you friction at work? Has your background been an asset on the job? Share your stories with me for a future column by e-mail at slayterme@washpost.com. If I publish your comments, you could win a copy of Alfred Lubrano's "Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams."

Join Mary Ellen Slayter for *Career Track Live*, an online discussion of issues affecting young workers, at 11 a.m. tomorrow at www.washingtonpost.com.