

# Visual Artist

Make the work, then find the people who will pay for it. Almost nobody does this without a second income at the start.

## TYPICAL PAY

**\$74,750**

a year, full time

## PAY RANGE

**\$31k to \$128k**

starting to experienced

## TIME TO QUALIFY

**up to 4 years**

after high school

## DEMAND

**Limited**

job outlook

## LICENCE NEEDED

**No**

anyone can do it

## WHERE YOU WORK

**Home studios, shared studio buildings, galleries, art fairs, client...**

## How you get there

- 1 High school** Grade 12  
Make a lot of work and keep all of it. Art programs admit on a portfolio, and a portfolio takes two years to build, not two weeks.
- 2 Foundation year, if you go to art school** 1 year  
Rhode Island School of Design calls its version Experimental and Foundation Studies. Everyone does drawing, color and three-dimensional work before choosing a major.
- 3 Degree, or self-directed practice** 0 to 4 years  
A four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts, a university art major, or no degree at all while you work and make things. All three produce working artists.
- 4 Build a body of work** 2 to 5 years  
Twenty to thirty pieces that clearly belong together. Until that exists you have nothing to show a gallery, a grant panel or a client.
- 5 Get it seen** Ongoing  
Open studios, group shows, art fairs, social media, a plain website with good photographs. Repeat for years.

## Pros and cons

- + Nobody can stop you starting, today, for free
- + You own what you make and the income compounds over decades
- + The work is yours, not a client's brief
- Income is unpredictable and can be zero for long stretches
- No employer means no health insurance, no sick pay and no pension
- Rejection is constant and mostly unexplained

## Optional boosts

Illustration work. Public art. A teaching credential. Digital skills.

## Good to know

### Nearly 5.4 million people work in arts and culture

The National Endowment for the Arts tracks the arts economy with the federal statistics agency and counts close to 5.4 million Americans working across 35 arts and cultural industries. Most of the...

### The government cannot classify you

The national wage survey has categories for fine artists, illustrators, craft artists and art directors, and then a leftover bucket named artists and related workers, all other. A lot of real careers live in that b...

### Where these numbers come from

O\*NET OnLine: Artists and Related Workers, All Other (27-1019.00)  
My Next Move: Fine Artists, Including Painters, Sculptors and Illustrators (27-1013.00)  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Rhode Island School of Design, academic programs

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/visual-artist>



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