

**ARTISTS WHO WORK WITH THEIR HANDS: PAINTERS, SCULPTORS, CRAFT ARTISTS AND ARTIST PRINTMAKER:
A TREND REPORT, 1970-1990**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines trends in the visual arts occupations of painters, sculptors, craft artists and artist printmakers—all of whom currently occupy one category of the United States Census—from 1970 to 1990—in the areas of employment, earnings and geographic distribution. In addition to information from the US. census, information has been used from the artist population surveys conducted by the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University and artist population surveys conducted by other researchers, both in and outside of the United States.

While the census has certain limitations, it also has certain advantages. The limitations center on (1) its inability to reflect certain conditions for artists such as: artists who work at a number of different jobs simultaneously, in more than one art form, artists for whom art making is only one of a number of careers, and (2) its system of classification. The advantages are the provision of (1) a relatively large and comprehensive database, (2) a broad picture of central tendencies of the artist population, and (3) one answer to the question, “How many artists?”

The discrete surveys used here provide more details for artist-specific areas, and more refined categories. Some provide more attitudinally based information, a factor which some economists are beginning to acknowledge as important when studying economic data on artists. We have focused on the decade of the 1980s with our non-census information: by 1980, public funding at the federal and state levels had been solidified into a workable system, a source of support that has been increasingly important to artists in visual arts occupations. The 1980s also provided us with the “art boom”, a time during which prices for contemporary art reached an economic peak in the marketplace. Finally, in the 1980s the visual arts provided a catalyst, through controversy over work by artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, among many others, for a broad-based public discussion of the role, function and support of art.

It would be unwise to view this report without acknowledging the enormous changes in opportunities for education and formal training for visual artists in this country, and the growth of public funding. The resources that have developed for individual artists in the last several decades—in the form of grants, arts service organizations, commissions, cooperative and commercial galleries—have changed artists’ relationship to their own development, their careers and their support systems.

Where possible, painters, sculptors, craft artists and artist printmakers (referred to as painters/craft artists) are compared to the experienced civilian labor force, professional specialty occupations, and all artists by gender. Major areas of concentration are geographic distribution, age, education, employment and earnings. Highlights appear below.

Between 1970 and 1990 the total artist population more than doubled, from 720,000 to 1,671,000. While the male artists population almost doubled (a rise of 46%), from 499,000 in 1970 to 931,000 in 1990, the female artist population tripled from 221,000 in 1970 to 675,000 in 1990. By 1990, painters/craft artists more than doubled from 102,600 in 1970 to 191,160 in 1990 and represented 13% of all artists. Women painters/craft artists had a substantial increase of 34% between 1980 and 1990.

While 78% of male artists and 72% of female artists are urban residents, these percentages have declined from 1980, with both male and female painters at slightly higher rates (80% in 1990 for males; 76% for female painters). While male artists and painters/craft artists had their highest proportions in the West in 1990, females in both categories moved South and substantially decreased in the Northwest.

Median ages for painters were higher at 40 than for all male artists at 37 and higher than the general labor force, and higher at 39 for female painters than for all female artists at 37, but similar to the general labor force. Both male and female painters and craftspeople have median ages of 41 in a study during the same time conducted by the Research Center for Arts and Culture.

The area of education seems to prove the most difficult when comparing census figures to discrete survey figures. According to the census, education for both male and female painters and craft artists is just holding steady at the 4+ years of college level and above, and both years of graduate education and degrees are suspect due to changes in the coding procedures of the census. According to the findings of the discrete surveys used here, over 40% of the painters/craft artists have graduate degrees.

Self-employment rose for both male and female painters and craft artists from 32% of males and 34% of females in 1970 to 47% of males and 49% of females in 1990. For females, as self-employment increased, unemployment declined but the definition of self-employment for visual artists is a highly complex one.

Females continued to earn less than males in all sectors between 1970 and 1990, even though between 1980 and 1990, the female median income for professionals more than doubled to \$23,113, and the median income for female painters/craft artists more than tripled to \$22,041. For female professionals who worked 50-52 weeks, median income was \$29,181; for female painters/craft artists, \$18,762. They did not fare as well as their artist counterparts, whose median income was \$20,825 in 1990.

In 1990, what we see from the census is a larger proportion of women as painters, sculptors, craft artists and artist printmakers, with fewer living in urban areas. They have a higher median income than all artists and the general labor force, but are closer in median age to professionals. For both males and females, the level of education, according to the census, seems to be just holding steady or rising slightly at the higher education levels, and more and more of them are self-employed, with percentages much higher than other kinds of artists. The median income for male painters and craft artists grew more slowly than for the total work force, male professionals and female painters/craft artists whose median income tripled since 1980. Finally, we seem to find that part-year female painters/craft artists earned more than their full-year counterparts.

What the discrete surveys offer us here is another view, one which targets the artist population more narrowly than the census and which suggests additional ways of looking at how artists view their occupations. These surveys also identify other areas of inquiry that broaden the picture of the artist in society. Neither the census nor the discrete surveys purport to provide a longitudinal database, a problem which the National Endowment for the Arts should perhaps try to address for artists in the future. Finally, research indicates the need for a regular survey of artists, if possible, by the National Endowment for the Arts, which combines the more relevant aspects of the census with other areas of inquiry, some of which have been identified in this document.