

The Life of a Corporate Artist: Balancing Client Demands with Artistic Freedom

By Betsy Wesner

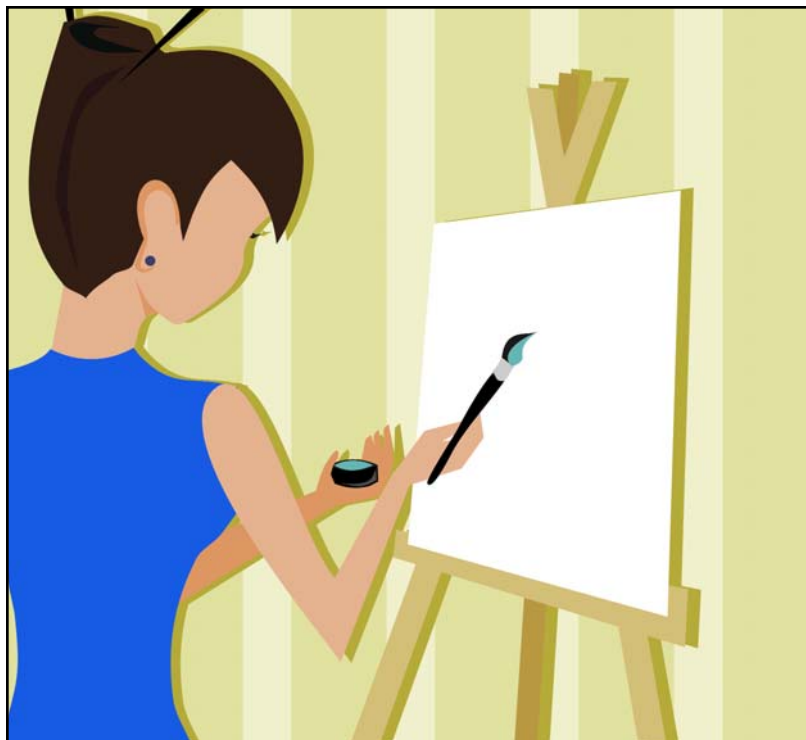
The interior designer's e-mail read: "Artwork should take up nine feet of wall space including frame. Acrylic or oil on canvas. Use strong colors: moss green, 'baby shit' yellow and purply-blue, a touch of pea green, not much maroon and no orange. Artwork will be hung in progressive 1930s-style lobby. Client is seeking an outdoorsy yet high tech look. No country, no geese, no barns."

Weeks later a series of three-foot canvases depicting a bold, woodland scene—incorporating all the required colors—greeted visitors in the lobby of the I.B.M. building in Columbus, Ohio. The paintings were the work of artist Linda Wesner, who has built a staunch following of corporate clients including Coca-Cola, I.B.M., and medical facilities seeking restful, placid landscapes and still lifes.

There are three criteria for corporate art purchases, according to Columbus-based art consultant Linda Larrimer, of The Art Exchange: size and color to fit specific rooms or hallways, non-controversial subject matter, and price. "Clients often produce fabric swatches, wood trim, or paint chips that they want artists to match," said Ms. Larrimer. "The business wants to set a tone when you enter their space. They want art-

work to emphasize who they are."

Ms. Wesner works with three different media, depending on the subject and client preference: colored pencil, acrylic, and oil paint. "Paintings on canvas are better suited to larger areas like lobbies or hallways," said Ms. Wesner, "and colored pencil drawings are smaller and more appropriate for intimate spaces like offices or waiting rooms."



Organization is a must for an artist working with corporations. "I set short term and long term goals and map out what I want to accomplish each week," said Ms. Wesner, whose studio is in her Lewis Center, Ohio, home. "I have to be both manager and subordinate. I get started early, usually by 7 a.m., in my well-lit colored pencil studio because pencils demand precise, short movements." Later in the day she moves downstairs to her basement

painting studio, where her strokes are looser and bolder.

Ms. Wesner is constantly on the prowl for subjects she finds personally intriguing yet suitable for corporate commissions. Cameras are always tucked into Ms. Wesner's handbag and glove compartment. Friends and family have learned to budget extra time for travel—especially through rural areas—so that Ms. Wesner can stop to

capture abandoned farmhouses and industrial buildings, rivers, and overgrown paths. Ms. Wesner uses her photographs to piece together images that may eventually be developed into a painting or drawing.

For Ms. Wesner, working with corporations requires a careful balance between meeting her clients' needs and fueling her creativity. "The hardest part of meeting the client's expectations is that your inner critic is very strong," said Ms. Wesner. "It's easy to question whether the client will like the final product." Years ago she struggled with her artwork because she tried harder

to please clients than herself. "I began to feel like I was painting by number," said Ms. Wesner. "My passion wasn't coming through in my artwork."

She learned to balance her clients' needs with her own creativity by setting up an area in her studio she calls her "artist's sandbox," strictly for experimentation. The sandbox is an old card table wedged into a corner of her studio. It's equipped with paper,

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free Ivy League education.

And, it's that education that has led me back to my passion of writing. My point is that sometimes you won't be sure about what's next, and sometimes—in the moment—you will make choices that make the most sense emotionally, financially, or even practically. But if you keep your dream as close to the surface as possible—or even have to tuck it away for safe keeping like I did—

you can still make it happen.

For most people, life is not a straight and simple path. It is a circuitous series of events...and it's exciting to not always know where it's leading you. For me, who knows if I ever would have ended up in graduate school had I not worked at a bank that would pay for it? The important thing is that I've learned and grown and feel true to myself as I re-connect with writing 20 years

after that tenth grade dream blossomed.

Nothing is a waste in life. Every experience will enrich you. I know that the jobs I've had and the co-workers I've encountered will provide rich content for my writing. For you it might be music, art, or big business that inspires you. Make your own choices. Bill Cosby said, "I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." ■

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puter crashes are a weekly event.

But let me tell you about the last straw. Not long after our son was born, we bought a digital video camera. Now we would be able to shoot video of Leo and post it on the Web for all to see. I was convinced my PC could handle this task better than the Mac. I challenged my wife to a duel—Mac vs. PC.

I shot about ten minutes of video, and the race was on. I dashed over and plugged the camera into my PC. I loaded the software and connected it to my computer. I went through the setup steps, and the camera finally



appeared. There was the precious footage sitting right in front of me. The problem was I could do absolutely nothing with it.

As I frantically searched the Internet for video editing software, my wife quietly took the camera over to her Mac. Before I could even download a program to edit the video, she

had used Apple's iMovie to make a fantastic three-minute movie. And she had posted it on her .Mac web site complete with a music soundtrack.

I stand in front of you a former PC loyalist who now spends a lot of time in front of a Mac. Since I have lost all the arguments, I'm now saving up to buy my own. I'm looking forward to the end of viruses and crashes. I'm looking forward to making movies and managing music and photos on my own computer. Best of all, the new Macs are faster than the ones Apple made a few years ago. I'm looking forward to challenging my wife to the next race. ■

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brushes, vivid colored pencils and paints, and painting "tools"—from cotton swabs, sponges, and eye-droppers to cut up credit cards and sand paper. Ms. Wesner's list of "sandbox rules"—tacked above the table—grant her freedom to diverge from her core business: 1) take risk and ignore my inner critic, 2) be open to clues from my environment, and 3) create works for my eyes only. She practices techniques in the sandbox that may find

their way into her mainstream artwork.

Maintaining a lucrative corporate business requires Ms. Wesner to divide her time between "pure art"—the actual act of drawing or painting, and "business art"—the administrative and marketing duties that play a major factor in developing her client base. After a morning of intense drawing and painting, she transforms from artist to marketing representative. She spends the afternoon responding to emails and

phone calls from clients and galleries, completing prospectuses for juried shows, photographing finished work for her records, and framing artwork.

Satisfying the client isn't the only aim for Ms. Wesner. "My goal is to create artwork that has meaning, something that office workers or visitors can interpret in their own way. Sometimes it will inspire. Sometimes it will comfort. I want the artwork to be an old friend." ■