Art Careers
Still Pay Poorly, Surveys Find

Art boom or no art boom, the vast majority of artists can expect to earn pitifully little from their work, say a number of recently published studies. Overall, artistic careers posted anemic earnings in the '70s and '80s, the research shows, and the prognosis for the '90s is grimmer still.

A survey of 4,146 visual, literary and performing artists conducted by Columbia University's Research Center for Arts and Culture found that more than half of the respondents earned less than $3,000 from their art in 1988. Gross income for 85 percent of those surveyed was $30,000 or less. Only four percent reported art earnings of more than $40,000. Ten percent earned between $20,000 and $40,000 from their art. Only 27 percent of those surveyed—from painters and sculptors to writers, musicians and dancers—earn their major income as artists, 77 percent work at other jobs to support themselves.

Of the 85 percent who said they earn money through their art, only half earned enough to cover expenses. Other findings: 42 percent of respondents are college graduates, 14 percent spent less than 10 hours a week on their art and related activities, and 22 percent said they spent more than 40 hours on it. The 102-question survey was answered by artists in New York, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Cape Cod and Western Massachusetts.

A separate set of studies in The Modern Muse: The Support and Condition of Artists, edited by C. Richard Swaim of the University of Baltimore and published by the American Council for the Arts, charts the decline in artists' earnings since the '70s and forecasts cloudy times ahead for artist employment in the year 2000. As the population of working artists increases, individual earnings are likely to decline, the ACA study says. The number of artists rose 84 percent between 1972 and 1986 to 1.2 million; the ACA study projects continued growth of another 31 percent, to 1.5 million, by the turn of the century.

According to the ACA study, during the '70s most artists suffered a severe decline in real earnings of 37 percent, nearly five times that of professions in general. Painters and sculptors were especially hard hit during the '70s; their real earnings dropped by 62 percent. Women painters and sculptors, who make up 48 percent of the profession, earned only 48 percent as much as their male counterparts.

—Walter Robinson