

Artists in America face food, housing and healthcare insecurity as global art sales reach an estimated \$57.5 billion

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A recent report on the conditions of artists in the US points to their economic difficulties at a time of the almost unimaginable concentration of wealth at the top of society. The “National Survey of Artists” was commissioned by the Mellon Foundation, in partnership with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

The survey solicited responses, according to the Mellon Foundation, from “a nationally representative sample of artists and culture bearers,” 2,618 in number, and “offers one of the most comprehensive portraits to date of how creative workers live, work, and sustain their practices.”

The artists were asked a series of questions about “their artistic practices, work and jobholding, earnings, wellbeing, and personal characteristics.”

One has a suspicion that the sample group may not in fact address the conditions affecting thousands and thousands of the youngest and most vulnerable artists, less likely to be included in such a study. The average age of artists in the survey was 43.28 years with 40 percent under the age of 35 years. About 18 percent artists were age 65 or older.

Nonetheless, the figures are still startling, revealing a body of men and women often obliged to work two, three or four jobs to stay afloat and facing uncertainty and precarity on various fronts.

Almost a third of artists’ primary activity was in the performing arts (31 percent) and another third was in the visual arts (31 percent), followed by craft arts (19 percent) and writing (14 percent). Only four percent of artists’ primary arts activity fell outside these four principal disciplines.

The respondents identified as 49.04 percent female and 46.69 percent male. Eighty-six percent live in metropolitan areas. “When combining racial and ethnic identity following the U.S. Census procedure,” the study reveals that 62 percent of artists identified as non-Hispanic white, 15 percent as non-Hispanic black, 12 percent as Hispanic and 6 percent as Asian-Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic).

The most salient facts, however, concern the financial and economic circumstances of those considering themselves artists, art teachers or “culture bearers.” The condition of the

artist is one of the best indicators of the health of a society. The median annual wage for police and sheriff’s patrol officers in the US was \$76,290 in May 2024. The average annual pay for an ICE agent is approximately \$62,702, but this can go much higher in high-paying cities and with seniority. In May 2024, the median annual wage for craft and fine artists was \$56,260.

In its introduction, the National Survey of Artists reports that its key findings

reveal that artists across the United States continue to face significant financial insecurity and complex working lives. More than half (57%) of artists reported being somewhat or very worried about at least one form of financial vulnerability—such as affording food, housing, medical care, or utilities—with 22% concerned about having enough to eat and 32% about covering medical costs in the month ahead.

Other findings:

- More than a third of artists (37 percent) reported income from one or more public assistance sources, including Social Security income (20 percent) and income from state or local welfare (15 percent).
- Nearly half of working artists (48 percent) had at least one temporary job in the last 12 months, while just over three-quarters of working artists (76 percent) had at least one part-time job over the last 12 months.
- Just over one-quarter (27 percent) of artists who had a main job earned less than \$2,500 in the past 12 months in their main job. And just under one quarter of artists (23 percent) who had a main job earned more than \$50,000 in pre-tax earnings. Artists with a main job reported a median income from that job of \$15,000 per year.
- 11 percent of artists worked at a third job during the last 12 months. Five percent of artists held a fourth job.
- Fewer than half of artists owned their primary vehicle (49 percent), owned their home (40 percent) and/or had a

retirement account (40 percent).

- 43 percent of artists had credit card debt. About one-quarter of artists had mortgage debt (28 percent) or a car loan (27 percent). About one-fifth of artists had school loans (20 percent) and just under one-fifth had medical debt (17 percent).

Remarkably, slightly less than one-quarter of artists were at least somewhat worried about having enough to eat. Such worry was even greater for having enough work (31 percent) or paying for housing (30 percent), utilities (30 percent), financial debts (39 percent) and/or medical bills (32 percent).

And,

More than one-third (36%) of artists reported that they had not received routine dental care in the past 12 months ... More than one-quarter (29%) were unable to get medical care, tests, or treatments that they or a doctor believed was necessary in the prior year.

The survey authors write:

As a way of measuring worry more generally, we added responses across all items to create a “financial worry index” ... Here we see that well over half of artists (57%) were at least somewhat worried about one or more of these issues and 8% were at least somewhat worried about all six issues.

While working artists struggle to make ends meet and continue their creative activity, the multi-millionaires and billionaires who operate the global art market, despite ups and downs, continue to reap vast rewards.

The *New York Times* reported last week that the last three years had been characterized by “layoffs at auction houses. Major galleries closed. Sales continued to shrink, by 12 percent last year, according to the recent survey of global collecting by Art Basel and UBS.” Other estimates indicate that global art market sales reached an estimated \$57.5 billion in 2024, down from \$65.2 billion in 2023 and \$67.8 billion in 2022.

However,

with some business strategy and a little luck, auction houses sold \$2.2 billion worth of art last week. Altogether, the November marquee auctions in New York generated a 77 percent increase over last year’s equivalent sales (though still down 30 percent from the market’s recent peak of \$3.2 billion in 2022).

The works included Gustav Klimt’s “Portrait of Elisabeth Lederer,” 1914–1916, sold for \$236.4 million, the second highest price ever paid at auction for a work of art.

A 1954 painting by René Magritte, *L’empire des Lumières* ... sold [in November 2024] for \$121.2 million. The painting surpassed its \$95 million estimate at Christie’s New York this week, making it the first Magritte work ever to sell for nine figures. (*Smithsonian Magazine*)

CNN recently reported that

A self-portrait by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo [“El sueño (La cama)”–“The Dream (The Bed),” 1940] has become the most valuable work by a female artist sold at auction after selling for \$54.7 million.

High-net-worth individuals (HNWIs)—those with more than \$2 million in investable assets—are spending a bit less on art these days, according to *Forbes*, and more on other “collectibles.” Those individuals are planning, on average, to spend \$108,270 on art, \$29,243 on designer watches, \$23,695 on designer jewelry and \$12,619 on designer accessories (including handbags).

As *Forbes* notes soothingly, “amid the art world’s shifts, the wealthy are still finding value in the broader collectibles category, and auction houses are expanding their offerings.”



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