

SUCCESS IN THE ARTS

What It Takes To Make It In Creative Fields

SECTION ONE



A. Michael Shumate



A. Michael Shumate is a career graphic designer and illustrator whose work is used all over the world. For the last nineteen years he has also been a Professor of Graphic Design and Illustration at St. Lawrence College.

Son of an artist and a musician, husband to a music teacher, and father to more musicians, filmmakers, a writer, a fine woodworker and a photographer, the principles that Michael teaches in "Success in the Arts" apply equally to all of the arts.





Table of Contents

Chapter 1.	Who Is the Grand Poobah?	4
Chapter 2.	Fame at an Early Age	8
Chapter 3.	Trial By Ordeal	10
Chapter 4.	The Issue of Talent	25
Chapter 5.	To Catch A Monkey	29
Chapter 6.	Challenging Decisions	33

**You are free to share this book with whoever you like,
as long as you do not sell it or modify it**



1. Who is the Grand Poobah?

Every year thousands of people decide to try their hand at one of the arts just for personal enrichment: painting, music, drama, writing, dance, filmmaking and so on. Most enjoy the experience and want art to be a part of their life as a hobby or pastime. But others feel a hunger to achieve something professionally in this area and want to dedicate their life, or at least the next part of their life, to trying to make a go of it in that art form. Maybe you are in this second group. If so, this book is for you.

Once you announce your intentions to the world, you'll receive tons of free advice. Much of it will be conflicting. And if it's conflicting, it can't *all* be true, can it? Much of this free advice is "folk wisdom" passed on via the grape vine. It is truly amazing how much sheer stupidity takes on a life of its own, becoming one of those things that "everybody knows." The great writer Bertrand Russell said, "The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd."

After a while you may get jaded by free advice, thinking that it's worth every cent that you paid for it—nothing at all!

Throughout my life I have tried and tested most of the advice given to aspiring professional artists. Much of the counsel I have heard in my



career is both fanciful and bogus. I assume that much of the counsel given to you is similarly worthless.

I have different advice to give. You may think it's stupid, too. But I'm betting that if you give this book some serious consideration, you will see by your own experience in the arts that this advice will serve you well if you follow it. I hope to clear some of the fog from your path with lessons I have learned and things I deeply believe. I intend to deflate some stuffed shirts and puncture some puffed-up notions of the art world as I go.

The first day of teaching any new students, I tell them to call me Michael, not Professor Shumate or Mr. Shumate. Then I tell them if they forget my name, they can always call me the Grand Poobah. That always gets a laugh from them and it establishes a rapport with my students. They know that even though I have much to teach them, I don't take myself too seriously and will at least try to deal with issues with some humor. They also sense that I anticipate that any respect they gain for me will be earned—I expect none granted by my title or position—and that ego games are not something we'll be playing.

The term Grand Poobah comes from the Gilbert and Sullivan musical *The Mikado*. It is one of many titles that an officious character has granted himself. The term has come to mean “anyone with no real authority but who acts otherwise” (as defined, appropriately enough, in Wikipedia). There you have it. I will speak with great authority where I have none, except that which experience has given me.

And you might ask, “What experience does this guy have?” Fair question. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in graphic de-



sign and I've been a professional designer and illustrator for over thirty-five years. Among my clients are the NFL, Simon & Schuster Publishers, Kelly Services, *British Airways Magazine*, the Screen Actors Guild, *Business Week* and Prudential Financial to name a few. And for the last nineteen years, in addition to freelancing, I've been teaching graphic design and illustration at St. Lawrence College--the last sixteen years as a professor.

Some of you may say, "He doesn't know anything about *my* art." It's true that my personal career has been focused on the graphic arts. But I'm the son of a career musician, and husband to a piano teacher. Plus two of my children are piano teachers and another plays French horn with the Louisville and Phoenix symphonies. Another of my children is a writer, one a photographer, another is a fine woodworker and two others are studying film at university. Yes, I have eight children, all engaged in at least one of the arts. I have plenty of contact with the other arts and their practitioners.

The observations I share in this book apply equally to any and all of the arts. It doesn't matter which art you've chosen because I'm not talking about any individual skills that each of the arts require, but rather how to *succeed* in the arts. These principles apply as much to painting as to music, as much to writing as to film. They also apply as much today as they did fifty years ago.

Because of that, what will likely be of the most value to you in this book will not be some specific technique for your particular art, but an adjustment of your attitudes. Ultimately, I believe this could be the most important thing I can give you. If you read it and understand it, you will



be freed from some very prevalent misconceptions about the arts, which have led countless people to make very costly mistakes in their careers and in their lives.

This will be a personal book, from me to you, an aspiring artist. My hope is to save you a few years of trial and error and speed you on to succeed in your chosen art.

In these pages we'll deal with some very important questions:

- What qualities most promote success in the arts?
- How can you know if you have enough talent to make it?
- How do you get through the tough times?
- How do you deal with criticism?
- How do you help yourself “get the breaks” in your field?
- What is real creativity?
- How do you keep the important things in your life and not “sell your soul” to get to the top?
- What if you don't make it?

The Straight and Narrow Path

Many of the things we will discuss here are complex issues. Most will have multiple facets and several possible approaches. Quite often they also have many ways we can mess up, too. At times, it may appear that I'm contradicting myself. While I agree that I'm not immune from that kind of error, I may warn about pitfalls on the left side of the path and other dangers on the right side. That sort of counsel is not contradictory. There will still be a safe path down the middle which may not be easy to walk, but can be navigated if due diligence is given to the prin-



ciples discussed. It's the proverbial straight and narrow path.

What's My Role?

I've dubbed myself the Grand Poobah. By doing so you should know that I claim two things about myself simultaneously: 1) I have some things to teach you; and 2) I know that I don't know it all and I'm not taking myself too seriously.

You might consider me a coach. One who knows what he does by experience, knows how some things are done and is willing to help you learn how. But remember this, no matter how good the coach is or what medals he may have garnered in the past, the coach can only show and tell (we're all back in kindergarten again); then *you* have to do it.

Think of a diving coach. He shows his pupils how to do the forward one-and-one-half somersault with four twists. He may describe it in detail, move by move. But, in the end, each diver is on the high platform—*alone*.

Naturally, divers don't start their instruction on the high platform. They start at the side of the pool, then move to the low board, then the intermediate board.

And yet, when we see really good divers do their best, it looks so much easier than it is.

So it is with all the arts, too. Repetition makes some things become second nature and appear easier than they are. The master makes it look so natural, almost effortless. Almost like *we* could do it, too.

And that's the bug that's bitten us, all of us who have aspired to any of the arts. We want to be the masters.

That's a good goal. Let's work at it. I won't promise that each of us



can do it in the end. But I can outline some of the principles we need to know in order to go as far as our talents, hearts and minds can take us.

The first step is to have an open mind. I don't claim to have all the answers, but I have a great deal for you to think about. John Kenneth Galbraith, the famous economist and philosopher of the twentieth century, said, "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof." It can be hard to change our minds. It's a brave thing to do. The often-quoted Geoffrey F. Albert said, "It often takes more courage to change one's opinion than to stick to it." I'm not asking you to necessarily change your mind, but to give each concept some contemplation. Dr. Wayne Dyer, author of more than two dozen books, said, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

So be of good courage and think deeply. In the end, naturally, you'll make up your own mind about what I have to say.

That is as it should be.

But maybe, having pondered the things that I will present to you, and by questioning the mind-set that you have previously held, you may look at the arts with new eyes and perhaps be a little wiser and more directed in your goals.

I hope so. I wish you success.

This Book's Set-up

This book's first section is largely autobiographical. It will lay a conceptual foundation for the principles that will be discussed in greater depth in sections two, three and four.



2. Fame at an Early Age

When I was nine, suffering from frequent bouts of boredom, I saw somewhere instructions for drawing the face of Mickey Mouse. In the days before Pokemon, Spiderman and Star Wars, Mickey Mouse was the coolest character I knew. I followed the drawing instructions: a couple of ovals, a few curved lines, a circle or two and a few connecting arcs and, voila! There was Mickey himself staring back at me.

This was genuine magic to me, but the best part was that *I* was the magician! I was thrilled with what I had done. I drew Mickey's face over and over. Before long I could do it from memory and did so at every opportunity. At school one of my little friends saw me drawing and was spellbound. "Wow! You're an artist!"

I loved it! I believed it, too.

With that kind of encouragement, I sought out and learned how to draw the faces of Donald Duck and Goofy. Now I had a repertoire! Three whole faces. No bodies and just one single expression each, but I now drew these faces over and over.

One day, one of my little admirers called the teacher over, "Look what he can do!" The teacher was very encouraging. "My! What an artist you are!"



I loved it! And I believed it, too.

One day I was bragging to my younger sister Cathy (who was about seven or eight) about what a great artist I was because I could draw these three cartoon faces. My mother overheard me. She had studied art after high school and knew that I needed a reality check. She sat Cathy and me down, handed me a pad and pencil and told me to draw a portrait of Cathy. My sister could only hold still for about fifteen minutes, which was a good thing because my drawing wasn't going so well. In fact, the drawing looked a lot like George Washington. Just so you know, my sister does not now, nor did she then, look *at all* like George Washington.

Well, I had received quite a jolt.

A few weeks later there was a contest at my school to draw a picture of George Washington in honor of his birthday.

You guessed it. I submitted the picture of my sister Cathy. And I won the contest for the whole school! Now the whole school knew I was an artist.

I loved it! And I believed it, too.

Life went on and I pursued my art with varying success. After a few years, my mother gave me her oil paint set with strict instructions that I was never to waste these paints because they were very expensive. I learned to use them and did a few paintings. One day I decided to paint and began squeezing paints out on my pallet. I had a few colors on the palette when I decided that I really didn't feel like painting after all. But I had all this paint on the palette. And there was no way to put the paint back into the tubes. What was I to do?

I took the small bulletin board with a wooden frame off my wall and



smeared the paints onto it. Then I stuck it in the closet.

Some months later my mother saw in the newspaper a notice for a five county art contest. She suggested that I submit my abstract painting.

I asked her, “What abstract painting?”

“The one in your closet. The orange and white one.”

“Oh – right. . . *that* abstract painting . . . Sure.”

So I submitted the smeared bulletin board to the Five County Art Contest. And I won first place in the abstract division.

My name was in the paper. Now five counties knew that I was an artist.

I loved it! And I believed it, too.

As high school graduation drew near, I did a lot of soul-searching about what career to pursue. I must have had second thoughts about my artistic abilities because I decided to study marine biology at the University of Maryland. I went to school for three semesters and then took a two-year break from school. During that time I did some more self-examination before returning to university.

When I did, I decided that what I really wanted to do was art. I loved the magic, and especially I loved being the magician. So I returned to my education, transferring to Brigham Young University as an art major.

Then came a harsh initiation.



3. Trial by Ordeal

I resumed my university education as an art major. I was ready to officially claim the title of artist that people had attributed to me all my life.

(Gulp!) Here goes.

I got into my first figure drawing class. I wasn't sure how I'd do. That didn't last long. I saw the beautiful work that others were producing.

(Gasp!)

My work...was clumsy. Ugly. Amateurish. My drawings still reminded me of the Cathy/George Washington picture. I was not the great artist I had always thought I was. I was mediocre at best. I didn't belong with these other folks. As the weeks went by, my whole self-identity melted into a sticky pool at my feet.

I was ashamed of my drawings. I hung my head at my lack of talent. What was I to do?

After one semester, I couldn't take it any more. I changed majors from art to graphic design. There I could still be visually creative and work with the images of others, not my own, and I wouldn't have to draw.

I actually excelled at graphic design. What a refreshing change! I found I had some natural affinity for type, layout, color, and so on. It



also really helped that I landed a part-time student job at a university department that needed lots of brochures and posters designed for special courses and conferences. This accelerated my learning in graphic design. I was getting real pieces printed almost every week and, before long, I was well ahead of my fellow graphic design students.

During this same time I got married and we had our first child. We left school for a short time for financial reasons and I worked as a graphic designer at the largest design studio in the state, even though I wasn't finished with my schooling. After nine months, financially stable again, I realized that if I didn't go back to school and finish my bachelor's degree right then, I never would. (Groceries, paychecks and evenings with no homework every night can become *very* addictive, you know.)

So I went back to university and, because of all my professional graphic design experience, I landed a job as part-time faculty, teaching two of the beginning graphic design courses. This was a real blessing because that job not only gave us enough to live on (barely), but it also exempted me from having to pay tuition. What good fortune!

But life wouldn't let me hide from drawing forever. Two of the courses required for my graphic design degree were Illustration 101 and 201. I had put off taking them because I knew I would have to draw in them. Still, I couldn't avoid them anymore, and I had to confront my old nemesis, drawing.

On the first day of illustration class, our teacher—a famous illustrator, graphic designer, and former art director of Capitol Records—gave us our first assignment: to illustrate a scene from a book we had read. I decided to illustrate the entrance to the Mirkwood from *The Hobbit*. I



had deliberately picked an inanimate subject. No people or animals, just some spooky trees and mountains. I worked hours and hours on it and was quite pleased with the finished product.

I got to class early and proudly showed my painting to the teacher. “What do you think of that?” I asked excitedly.

He looked it over carefully and then gave a very unimpressed, “Neh”

“Neh?” I said. “What do you mean by ‘neh’?! Do you know how long I worked on this?” I felt justified in being upset. My teacher had taught many of my early graphic design courses and was my direct supervisor in my part-time faculty teaching. He knew I was in a difficult position.

He took me into his office, and said, “Listen, Michael. I’m going to exempt you from all of the regular coursework for this class if you’ll undertake a special project.”

Exemption sounded too good to be true. “OK!” I answered without another thought.

He smiled and grabbed a discarded sheet of illustration board, chopped it up into a dozen chunks about four by five inches and handed them to me. “Here’s your project: you’re going to do five hundred paintings in acrylic this big.”

My jaw fell open and I stammered, “Five–hund–FIVE HUNDRED?”

“Yep.”

“Paintings of what?”

“That’s the key: they *can’t* be paintings of *anything*. No paintings of people; no paintings of trees, flowers, buildings or deliberate designs of any kind.”



“Huh? What do you mean?” My head was spinning. “So you want them to be what—abstract?”

“That’s right, abstract. And I want you to vary your color palettes and use a lot of colors sometimes and only a few at others. Learn everything that paint can do.”

I wondered, is it too late to back out of this deal? But I had already said I would.

I finished the project. (Actually, I only completed 467 paintings, but he accepted them.) I got an A in my first illustration course. Some of those little paintings still look good today. I have a couple hanging on my office wall right now.

And a miraculous thing had happened. My hands didn’t end at my fingertips; they ended with the hairs of the paintbrush. It was a part of me. And the paint was a part of my mind. I knew EVERYTHING that paint could do.

Regrettably, I still couldn’t draw worth undercooked beans.



4. The Issue of Talent

So I had passed Illustration 101 with an A. Me? Amazing! But I still had to take and pass Illustration 201. The teacher was the same, and there would be no exemption from regular assignments this time.

It was a rigorous course, and I worked very hard. And an interesting thing happened. I decided that I would hide from image-making no longer and instead embraced it whole-heartedly. I not only did my work for illustration class, but began to use illustration wherever possible in my other graphic design projects. Even though I wasn't gifted—I had to use every bit of ingenuity to work around that—still, somehow I recognized that I had returned to my first love: the thrill of the magic of making images.

And I was the magician.

Near the end of that course I heard that my teacher (the same fellow) was telling his other classes about an unnamed student of his that “couldn't draw a stick figure without a ruler,” but still managed to create good images because he could “outsmart what he couldn't do with native ability” and because “he was willing to put in the time until it was right.” I found out when one of my fellow students had figured out that I was the unnamed student and told me. He said, “Hey, the teacher's talk-



ing about you.” Initially I thought I was being complimented until he repeated what was being said.

Somewhat offended, I went to my teacher and asked if I was the person he had been talking about. He said I was.

“How could you talk about me to other students?” I demanded.

“Well, I didn’t use your name. . .”

“Yeah, well, someone figured it out!”

He winced.

I asked him what he meant by his statement. And then he gave me one of the best lessons of my life—one that I pass on to you.

“Michael, there are three qualities that promote success in the arts. They are: 1) talent; 2) an ability to accomplish laterally what you can’t do directly; and 3) a passion for the work that compels you to work until it is right. If you only have one of those qualities you just won’t make it in the arts—even if that quality is talent! If you have all three qualities you can surely be a success in the arts. If you have two out of three, you *might* make it.”

Then he looked at me seriously and said, “Michael, you have these last two qualities. You just might make it.”

I stood there for a minute with a blank expression. He was telling me I had little or no talent. How could he do that? (Well—I guess I knew all along that it was true, didn’t I?) But he also told me that I *could* make it even with the very modest endowment of talent that I had.

I have pondered that counsel many times since that day and believe it to be true. We have all heard about very talented persons in various of the creative arts who have washed out. Just didn’t make it in spite of



sometimes spectacular talent. Talent is a great thing to have, but it's not enough. You see, even an outrageously talented person has limitations. Nobody can do *everything* well. There's always going to be some area where that person is weak.

That's when "smarts" must take over, the ingenuity to accomplish what cannot be done with your talent. Smarts is not talent, but the ability to get around indirectly what can't be done directly.

The last quality he spoke about is a love of the art and a willingness to keep at something until it works. That's heart. That's loving the work and not giving up until it just clicks.

Over the years since that pivotal day, I have come to see that the nature of talent is two-fold: one part is natural aptitude and another part is acquired mastery.

Consider two theoretical people with the same amount of inherent talent, but one is a thirty-year veteran of the art and the second person is a newbie. The first person will be able to do much more than the second, but not because of intrinsic ability, just because of the accrued skills that come from years of practicing the art.

Another aspect of intrinsic aptitude may be that a particular aspect of your inborn abilities might not be tapped until a certain kind of work or particular level of work is attempted. We sometimes call these people late bloomers.

I had an aptitude for public speaking that I never knew I had until, at age eighteen, I had to give a twenty-minute talk to about two hundred people. It went so well that some thought I had a lot of previous experience, but it was my first time. Of course, the fact that I spent about ten



hours preparing for this twenty-minute talk was also a factor. Who can say how much came from native talent and how much resulted from sheer effort?

I have come to this conclusion regarding talent: how much native ability you have may not matter nearly as much as the effort you put into your art. But you have to also be smart about it and know your limitations, though the boundary of those limitations should be pushed back continually through acquired skills. You also have to love your art enough to keep at it until it works.

I always tell my students that I do better artwork than any one else I have ever met with as little talent. If you want to, you can see if this guy who couldn't "draw a stick man without a ruler" has grown in skills. Decide for yourself. Visit my graphic design/illustration website at: www.VisualEntity.com. All of the work on the website (and the website itself) is my work.

At some level I believe talent is merely an understanding or skill already acquired. In the decades since my reawakened passion for creating images, I have learned many skills and grown in knowledge. (I think the work shown in my website will attest to that.) I have had to struggle to gain each bit of visual knowledge, but have always found the same thrill from the magic of creating images.

The best part is that *I* am the magician.

And there's nothing better than being the magician.



5. To Catch a Monkey

Somewhere along the way I heard this story. By the late 1800s it had become fashionable for every big city in the western world to have a zoo. There was a new business born to supply zoos with exotic animals. Among the most popular critters in any zoo were the usual suspects: lions, tigers and bears (oh, my!), elephants, snakes and, of course, monkeys. Many of these creatures were dangerous to bag, but they were still captured regularly by professional hunters. On the other hand, monkeys were not dangerous, but still posed a special problem. They lived in trees, were uncommonly intelligent and communicated with each other. It was nearly impossible to catch them unawares on the ground. If the great white hunters tried to shoot them while they were in the trees, even just to wound them, the fall to the ground was usually fatal. Strangely, most zoos were not interested in dead monkeys.

So the price for monkeys increased because the hunters were unable to meet demand.

Then the native guide to one western hunter told him that he knew how to catch a monkey, alive and unharmed. The hunter eagerly asked to know the secret.

“First you make a box frame and cover it with wire mesh. Have a door on top with a three-inch hole in it.”



“And then what?”

“Put some fruit in the box and lock it shut.”

“What kind of fruit? Something exotic or foreign?”

“No, just the ordinary fruit that the monkeys eat every day.”

“I see, old chap. And we wait in the bushes for them to approach the trap and shoot them?”

“No, we leave the box and come back to camp. When we return in a few hours we will have a trapped monkey.”

“Eh?”

Well, they tried it.

They made the box frame with wire mesh. Put some ordinary fruit in it. Locked the lid with the hole in it and, skeptically, went back to camp. And what happened was this.

Back at monkey central, the lookout scouts gave the all clear to the rest of the pack. *No hunters present or hiding in the bushes.*

A scout monkey was set down to investigate. *Nothing dangerous. Hey, there's fruit in there! Let me see if I can get it.* It reached into the hole in the top. And grasped the fruit. *Got it!*

The monkey then tried to pull its hand out of the box. But with the fruit in hand, it wouldn't fit through the hole, which was only big enough for its empty hand. *Something's wrong here!* The monkey put its hand back down but it just wouldn't come back out.

Hey guys, I'm stuck!

Some monkeys remained as lookouts for hunters while other monkeys came down to investigate. They looked at the trap from all angles. *Man, you sure are stuck! Don't know how to get you free.* It never oc-



curred to any of them for the trapped monkey to just let go of the fruit. Just not in a monkey's nature to let go once it's grabbed something.

When the great white hunter's group came back, all the other monkeys "went ape" and abandoned their buddy with its hand in the box. *Sorry, man, you're toast. Later.*

Absolutely desperate to escape, the monkey screamed, yelled, cried in fear and tried to get away from the trap, but its hand wouldn't fit through the hole. Still, the monkey wouldn't let go of the fruit.

To a chorus of anxious and agitated monkey chatters from the trees, the native guide gently put a blanket over the frantic, squealing trapped monkey. The trap door was unlocked, the fruit gently taken from the monkey's hand, and the hand was removed from the door hole as the monkey's legs and hands were securely tied. And the monkey spent the rest of its life looking at ogling zoo-goers.

And what, you may ask, is the moral of this story and how does it relate to our discussion here?

Well, it was explained to me that two-dimensional images (the object of my passion) were nothing more than color and form. If you get the color right and capture the forms, the image can't get away. You've bagged another image for your trophy wall. You've caught the monkey.

I know, it's an over-simplification, but it was a breakthrough moment for me.

I still loved being the magician. And if I just used the abilities my teacher said I had, I "just *might* make it."



Eat an Elephant

I was determined to make it. I had also learned that I could gain real skill through work and effort. (Remember the assignment to do the five hundred paintings?) I had also picked up several little drawing tricks that had made my drawing much better.

Anybody can eat an elephant: you just have to do it one bite at a time. With the enthusiasm of youth I decided to learn whatever I didn't know to become a professional illustrator. I determined to eat my elephant, one bite at a time.

This, you will appreciate, is a complete one hundred-eighty degree turn for me, the guy who got into graphic design for the express purpose of avoiding drawing for the rest of his life, especially the drawing or painting of people.

I had a few elective classes yet to take before graduating, so I decided to take a portrait painting class. The first assignment was to do a self portrait. We each had a mirror next to our easels and stood around looking at ourselves and painting. I chose a dabbing, neo-impressionist technique in oil and was very pleased with the end product. I proudly declared to my teacher (different teacher than mentioned before) that I had "found my style." He answered, "Don't be an ass! You are way too young in this journey to settle on a style. You should let every project be a new experiment. Do what the project needs and don't limit yourself by your previous successes."

I was stung. (I should have been used to it by then, but I wasn't.) Still, I took his advice to heart. I determined to honestly let each project



determine the style I would use and not make the project conform to what was already familiar to me.

That is good counsel that I give to all beginning artists. It's only natural to have preferences. But at the beginning stage of your education and career, you ought to be seeking to broaden your horizons. As I've already mentioned, some natural abilities will not manifest themselves unless you are trying new things. It would be a shame to fashion a career based on the narrow and immature tastes and abilities we have as adolescents. (Of course, we still expect our beginning high school students to do just that.)

Our goal—and not just at the beginning of our careers—ought to be to grow and expand continually. Once we stop, we stagnate. I am approaching sixty and yet this year I've taken on many new and totally different learning experiences, and I've committed myself to mastering many new skills and art forms. I'm pushing my limits. I recommend it to all. Lifelong learning is a worthy goal.



6. Challenging Decisions

I was finishing up university, for my Bachelor of Fine Art degree. A BFA differs from a Bachelor of Arts degree in that a BA signifies that you know *about* something, whereas a BFA certifies that in addition to knowing *about* the subject, you can *do it*, too. It is what is called a performance degree.

All BFA graduating candidates were required to do a final graduation project before finishing. These were shown every year in a special exhibit before the end of the year. Officially, I was a graphic design major with advertising as my minor. My graduate project could have been related to design or advertising, but I chose to do a series of illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*.

Did you know that the original *Arabian Nights* is actually four hard-bound volumes of stories? I didn't. I stumbled across the complete set in the library and was quite intrigued by the variety of stories. Some are the G-rated ones we've all seen in children's books: Sinbad, Alladin, the Genie and the Fisherman, and so on. But other less well-known *Arabian Nights* stories would definitely be PG-rated and some even a bit higher.

I undertook some new techniques for this project. I had learned that I could draw better from a photograph than I could from real life, so I used two kinds of photographs. I drew from photos that I took of people



(friends who agreed to pose for me) and costume reference pictures to make new original images that did not violate anyone's copyright. The illustrations were better than I had ever done before. I still show some of these on my illustration website now more than forty years later. (see <http://www.visualentity.com/histpages/hist10.html> and <http://www.visualentity.com/histpages/hist18.html>)

I got an A on my graduate project, graduated and went off to seek my fortune. My wife and I and two-and-a-half kids moved to a rather remote area to be close to family, and I hung out my shingle as a freelance graphic designer and commercial illustrator (I was far enough off the beaten path that there were no full-time jobs available for designer/illustrators). Much to my surprise, the first freelance job I got was as an illustrator. It was detailed nature illustration for a tourism book. I had to paint sixteen species of birds that were native to that area. Once that project was completed, the same client had me do a nature mural eight feet by six feet which featured about thirty specific species of plants and animals. I was becoming a nature illustrator, something I never had imagined. Over the years I have also done and enjoyed other kinds of illustration: advertising, historical, technical, juvenile and editorial.

Because the place we lived in was “in the sticks,” there were a few other graphic designers, but I think I was the only commercial illustrator in the whole region. In large metropolitan centers clients tend to look for illustrators who specialize in whatever kind of illustration they are shopping for. In the locality where I lived, I was the “only game in town” and so people came to me with all sorts of illustration—and graphic design—needs.



I regretted many times, while living in the boonies, the total lack of illustrator peers to commune with. But I have looked back now and realized that my remote locale provided me with more diverse opportunities than I ever would have had in a more populated place.

And I also stayed true to my commitment to approach each project on its own merits. In the fourteen years I lived and worked in that area I mastered acrylic in several different techniques, oil, watercolor, colored pencils, gouache, pastels and latex. In recent years I have also achieved a high proficiency with digital vector illustration and Photoshop. As well, I have deliberately pursued many different styles, both realistic and non-realistic. It was this very variety that prepared me to succeed as a professor of graphic design at St. Lawrence College.

Several years later we moved to our current home, which is closer to civilization (commercial centers), and I began to teach college. On the side, I embarked on a different kind of freelancing illustration, one that had not been possible in my former locale: conceptual editorial illustration. I worked up a whole new portfolio and began to market my services in Toronto, New York and Washington, DC.

While taking my portfolio around I learned about The Image Bank (TIB), a stock photography agency, which had started to offer stock illustration as well.

Stock photography and illustration have specific restrictions on the usage that a client contracts for, whereas royalty-free photography and illustration have no such controls. Once a person has purchased a royalty-free CD, for instance, there is virtually no limit to the uses that person may make of that image. For this reason, larger commercial clients will



not likely wish to use royalty-free material because of its lack of controls, whereas the limits placed on stock usage can guarantee an exclusivity of the image for a period of time within a certain geographic area. I became a contributor to TIB, which was at that time the largest stock photography and illustration agency in the world. Through stock illustration, my illustration work has been used all over the world, and I achieved a fair amount of success with them, renting the use of my illustration to clients like McGraw-Hill Publishers, *British Airways Magazine* and Kelly Services. One of my illustrations was the single most successful image in all the European offices of TIB around 1992.

Although my name is not known to many, I have had a successful career making images, just as I had hoped to do when young.

Just a couple of years ago I stumbled upon the website of my old teacher, the one who had given me that pivotal counsel about talent, smarts and heart. He has retired from teaching and does beautiful portraits. I contacted him, recounted his advice to me and referred him to my design and illustration website (www.VisualEntity.com). He wrote back and complimented me on what I had done.

I can't begin to tell how often I have pondered the counsel he gave me so many years ago. The three qualities for success in the arts come down to talent, mind and heart. Talent or skill is the ability to accomplish the work required. It doesn't matter which area of creative arts it is, either. Mind is the smarts or ability to sidestep your natural deficiencies to still achieve a desired outcome. Heart is a love of the work and a willingness to keep going until it works.



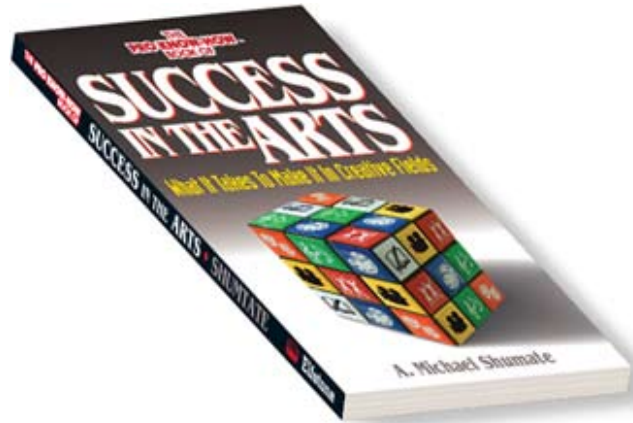
Those first two qualities, talent and mind can be learned by diligent study and effort. The only one of the three qualities that has to be present in you to begin with is the last one: heart—a love of the work and a willingness to keep at it until it is right. I believe anyone who has a true passion for their art can grow in abilities. It may be slow, but it will happen.

The most beautiful part about a profession in any creative field is that you can always be learning. There is no excuse for ever being bored. You will never know it all, but the learning is precious and the quest for the magic never ends.

And YOU get to be the magician.



The Rest of the Book



You've read the first quarter of my book *Success In The Arts*. I hope you've found it enlightening, uplifting and maybe even inspirational. The other three quarters of the book delves into the nature of talent, smarts and heart.

You can order it directly at <http://SuccessInTheArts.com>

What does it contain?

Here is the Table of Contents for the rest of **Success In The Arts**:

SECTION 2: TALENT

7. Everybody has some talents

- The Magic of Talent
- Inclination, Aptitude and Skill
- Talent and Tangent Skills
- Craft

8. Discover Your Talents

- Definition of talent
- Intelligence
- Personal Strengths
- Dyslexia
- Nurture or Nature?



- 9. **Models of Talent**
 - The Soil Model
 - The Seed Model
 - Why Worry About It?
- 10. **What is Creativity?**
 - What Creativity Isn't
 - What Creativity Is
 - Brainstorming
 - Thinking Outside the Box
 - Using Your Back Burner

SECTION 3: SMARTS

- 11. **Using Your Smarts**
 - Learning Tricks
 - The Cycle
 - Seek a Mentor
 - Cultivate Challenging Peers
- 12. **Conventions, Rules and Principles**
 - Conventions
 - Rules
 - Principles
 - Popular Art or Purist?
- 13. **Getting the Breaks**
 - Luck or Leverage?
 - Get Out There
 - Underestimating Your Profession
 - Work Your Plan
 - The Art of Sacrifice
 - Marketing Yourself
 - Attitude Equals Altitude
 - Aim for the Top
 - Networking



14. Don't Pop Your Own Bubble

- Ease Off Before You Pop
- Influence, Homage and Plagiarism
- Finding Your Own Voice
- Never Stop Learning
- Take Care of Important Things

15. Prima Donna or Professional

- The Balancing Act
- Walk the Fine Line

SECTION 4: HEART

16. Paying Your Dues

- Einstein, Mozart and da Vinci
- Stretching Yourself
- Get Going
- Tough times
- Face your bullies

17. You Gotta Have Heart

- Facing Criticism
- Personal Taste
- Valid Criticism
- Consider Your sources
- You Still Have to Be Yourself

18. Getting and Giving

- Life As Art
- Teaching to Give Back and Learn
- No One Wants to be a Wannabe
- Don't give up

19. What If I Don't Make It?

- Suppose I don't Meet My Goals?
- The Journey and the Destination

Order your complete copy of **Success In The Arts** at:

<http://SuccessInTheArts.com>



A Gift for All Aspiring Artists

Writers, Musicians, Filmmakers Visual Artists, Dancers, Actors

Learn to answer these essential questions:

- What factors contribute most to success in the arts?
 - Do you have enough talent?
 - What do you need besides talent?
 - What are the myths about creativity?
- What is real creativity and how do you cultivate it?
 - How do you get through tough times?
 - How do you deal with criticism?
 - How do you “get the breaks” in your field?
 - What foundation principles don’t change?
- How do you hang on to the important things in life?
 - How do you keep from “selling your soul?”
 - What if you don’t make it?
 - **Save years of trial and error**
- **Avoid the common pitfalls of creative careers**
 - **A mentor in a book**

Order your complete copy of **Success In The Arts** at:
<http://SuccessInTheArts.com>