

# Artist's life isn't easy - but worth it

KEITH WHITCOMB JR., Staff Writer  
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POWNAL - John Leavy, who should know, believes it is much more difficult these days to pursue an artist's lifestyle, especially with the current economy.

Leavy, 71, isn't a starving artist, but he knows what it takes to make a living through his art. He said it's a shame young artists today have such a hard time making a living working seasonal jobs and living in cheap apartments while devoting their free hours to art.

Leavy, of Pownal, began his career as a painter in Manhattan, where he studied under the late Edwin Dickinson, a painter from upstate New York known for his self-portraits and landscapes. "He was a big influence on me," Leavy said.

He was always able to make a living as a painter in some capacity or another. Leavy said one of his more lucrative seasonal jobs was painting sets for theater productions.

These days, he said, people need to work five days a week, all year, to make ends meet in the cheapest of places. "There's a certain kind of bohemia needed if you're going to produce art and survive," he said, adding that working part time and being an artist was hard long before the current economy made it impossible.

In 1969, he was awarded the Prix de Rome, an artist fellowship that provides the winner housing in Rome, a small stipend, and all the time they need to paint. Leavy said he won "the Rome Prize" for two years, but stayed in Italy five more years teaching art history and doing portrait commissions.

Leavy first came to Vermont in

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1996, after again working in theater painting sets, and took up residence in Sandgate. He said Sandgate is very rural, and the drive to Williamstown, Mass., where he did some of his shows and attended theater performances, was inconvenient. While driving through Pownal regularly for so many years, he began to think it would be more convenient to live there, and in 2003 bought a home on Skyboro Road.

Pownal, Leavy said, has been home to many painters over the years and was something of a painter's colony during the 1930s. Pownal has an abundance of landscapes and farms, which makes for good paintings. "If you go and ask a farmer if you can paint on his property, chances are you're not the first person to ask," he said.

Leavy said he hadn't done any Pownal landscapes yet, but would like to. He doesn't enjoy painting during the summer, and prefers winter and mud season.

"You can drive past something that's boring as hell, but when snow falls on it, it becomes very interesting," he said.

He is about to finish a large wall painting of an Italian street scene. He said the model for the street is from a photograph, and the people in it are from old sketches he has done. The painting itself has been years in the making. Because it is an acrylic painting, it can be rolled up, stored and moved around.

One of his studio's design features is a special door in the corner designed to slip large paintings through. Leavy said he doesn't have a very practical mind-set, and on a few occasions, has painted something too large to remove from the studio. The door, he said, circumvents the problem.

Selling paintings, especially for beginners, is a challenge. Large paintings sell for more, even if they aren't as good as smaller ones. Leavy said he has only sold two large paintings, both for around \$15,000. "The problem is there are more paintings than there are galleries, and more galleries than there are people who buy paintings," he said.

Landscapes sell the best, nudes not so much, and portraits of people only sell to those who know the subject, Leavy said.

Posing for sketches and paintings can be a career in and of itself, he said. "It's easier to pose than people think," he said. A typical sitting is three hours, but when painting children who are a challenge to get sitting still, he prefers a quick sketch, which he paints later.

He said he misses the city, but when he travels to Manhattan he notices the noise and commotion more so than he used to. With the high cost of living, he said the countryside is now a better place for an artist to live.

Contact Keith Whitcomb at [kwhitcomb@benningtonbanner.com](mailto:kwhitcomb@benningtonbanner.com).