

**DAY TO DAY
of an...**

ART DIRECTOR

Day-to-Day Series Episode #10

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The Basics:

- As the name implies, the **Art Director** is the artist in charge of spear-heading the design team on an animated television show. They set the overarching design sensibilities for the entire series and decide what the show will look like.
- Using their formidable skills as a designer, Art Directors decide the **overall design treatment, direct the BG, Color and Character designers, and work alongside the Directors and Show Runners** to create the final look of each episode.

As with all positions in TV animation,
the role of the Art Director can
change depending on both the studio
and the individual AD.

Now let's talk Art Direction!

Development and Art Direction

At a lot of studios [especially larger studios like Disney, Cartoon Network and Dreamworks], there is a dedicated **Development Team** that works with the show runner to develop the show concept before it has even been greenlit to series.

These development teams often have **their own Art Director** who works closely with the show runner to create the first proofs of concept of the show.

Development usually **occurs outside of any production schedule**, employing character and BG designers as needed to create the vis dev.

Ride or Die Art Directors

In contrast to studios with dedicated development teams who only work on the show until it is greenlit, some shows may bring in **the Art Director who will be helming the entire series** to do the preliminary visual development as well.

In cases where **Show Runners are artists themselves**, the Show Runner might be doing some Art Direction during the development stage and working directly with designers like an Art Director would.

It really all depends on the particular studio and the needs of the show!

In the Beginning, there was the Art Director...

Once the show is greenlit, it leaves development and goes into production. At this stage, the series **Art Director** is selected by the Show Runner and brought on board.

[if the development Art Director is not also the series Art Director.]

Even though a lot of the first visuals are usually done in development, the Art Director serves as **the primary visual development artist of the actual series**, figuring out the nitty gritty of the designs and working closely with the Show Runner to **create the look of the show**.

This will often include **character explorations, visual development of primary locations and finalizing the style of the world**.

A Style All Your Own

Unlike the other members of the design team who are building their designs off of at least the infrastructure of the Art Director's style guide, the Art Director is responsible for creating this style to begin with.

Often times, AD's are selected for projects because their **preexisting work or personal aesthetic is along the lines of what the Show Runner envisions for the show...** but ultimately, the Art Director creates what the show will look like.

In instances of reboots or reimaginings of preexisting IP, the Art Director may have some foundation to work off of... but they are still the one who must decide how to alter, update or completely reconceive of the idea they are working with.

Designers Assemble!

Once the core look of the series is settled on, the Art Director will hire on designers to help create **the high number of BGs and character designs needed for an animated show.**

The Art Director and Show Runner are the ones who ultimately decide which designers to hire on.

The Art Director is able to **analyze the work of different designers** and decide whether they will be a good fit for the style of their particular show.

Pre-Design

With the design team all assembled and the first team of director and board artists starting, The Art Director launches into **Pre-Design**.

This is the stage where designs are launched for the board artists to reference **BEFORE** they do their board.

The **Art Director works alongside the Director** to decide which designs **NEED** to exist in order to begin the board... and which can be designed in boards and finalized afterwards.

Color Keys and Layout

Art Directors do a lot of **visual development and storyboard prep** to help inform the boards. One of these pre-design tools is a **color key, a rough painting of a bg.**

During Pre-Design the Art Director typically creates **only a few color keys to serve as guides for the board team.**

The Art Director consults closely with the episode's Director to suss out the rough layout and **design BGS that serve the needs of the story.**

For example:

The Director will talk with the Art Director about where they need key features like doors, counters, stages, etc to be for the shots they have in mind. Directors may even do top down "maps" to illustrate their layouts and then hand these off to the Art Director.

The Design Team

As the head of the design team, the Art Director **provides feedback and guidance to all of the designers** as they create their various character, props and bg designs.

The Art Director will provide the guiding information to **launch each designer on their new assignment**, and adjust/note the designs until it is ready to be seen by the show runner.

Specializing: BG vs Char

Because **most Art Directors come from being a designer themselves**, they usually have a strong suit, either BG or Character... though of course some Art Directors may be equally skilled in both.

But **USUALLY**, the Art Director will focus on their strongest area of expertise and hire on **another strong designer to help them lead their team.**

For example:

*An Art Director specializing in BG may work together with a **Character Design Lead** or a **Character Art Director**. An AD who comes from Character design may have a **BG Lead** or a **BG Art Director**.*

On shows with Show Runners who are also Character Designers [such as Bruce Smith on the Proud Family], the Show Runner may work very closely with the character designers themselves.

Art Reviews with Show Runners

Once the **Art Director** has reviewed **everything**, and gotten all of the designs to a place that they are happy with, they will have a larger review session to show the designs to the show runner.

Different show runners have varying degrees of involvement in design.

For example: A show runner from a writing BG might just say what they want changed while a show runner from an character design background might do a draw over.

Once the notes are given, the **Art Director oversees and delegates their execution.**

Art Directing Post-Boards

The Art Directing role often kicks into hyper drive after the animatic is built.

This is because it is at this point that **all the designs, characters, props and BGs that were created in the boards need to be DESIGNED AND FINALIZED by the design team.**

During this stage, the Art Director will work with all of his various designers to create the needed assets.

Color Scripts

Another common post boards feature is the **creation of the color script.**

A color script is a **blueprint of how the lighting and color for the ENTIRE EPISODE will be handled.**

Typically, the Art Director will string together screengrabs from each of the key shots into a large grid and paint over each of them to make color keys.

The color script maps out **time of day changes, mood lighting, specific effects and light treatment** and is what will really help the set the tone of the episode.

It allows everyone involved in the episode to see the final look of the episode it the same way.

[Of course, every show has different needs and not all shows do color scripts the same way, if at all.]

Style Guides

Because most current animated TV shows in the US are not animated in-house, the Art Director will also typically create a robust **STYLE GUIDE** to give to the vendor studio.

This may include things like:

- Guides for handling reflections
- Guides for drawing spills, splashes, clouds, smoke and other relevant special effects
- Guides for speedlines or UI displays
- Guides for how to handle text or "text like signs"

These style guides ensure that the vendor studio is properly equipped to handle any unique scenarios that might arise in future episodes.

Notes in Post

The Art Director is one of the few positions in the TV animation pipeline that extends over both pre and post production.

Once animation starts coming back from the vendor studio, the **Art Director will give notes on the design, color and lighting in the final shots.**

These notes may be given in the form of paint-overs, written notes, conversations with the vendor or a combination of all three.

All Episodes At Once

Similar to the Storyboard Directors, Art Director roles require a **high level of flexibility and multi-tasking.**

This is because like the Director, Art Directors do not just work on one episode at a time but rather are **handling several episodes at varying stages all at once.**

For example:

An Art Director might be doing Pre-Design for Episode #4 while doing Reviews for episode #3 and color scripts for episodes #1 and #2.

Tools of the Trade

Like most of the design team, Art Director's generally work in Adobe Photoshop... but this can depend on the needs and the aesthetic of the show.

Especially during development and visdev, the Art Director may use different tools that aren't as geared towards final production.

For example:

There may be instances where the Art Director chooses to do their initial visual development work with water color paints or with some other traditional medium.

Ultimately though, the final production pipeline will usually be a fully digital one.

Who Do I Work With?

As the helm of the design team, **the Art Director works closest with the Designers.**

The Art Director is the one deciding the process for the design team and will ultimately create a portion of the design pipeline to suit the needs of the show/ their own ideal working style.

For example, the Art Director can decide how designs are turned in, if they will review it live, or do draw overs, etc.

Who Do I Work With?

The Art Director also works with **Production Coordinators** to make sure the designs are moving through the various stages properly.

The Art Director works closely with the other department heads like **Directors**, **Supervising Directors** and **Show Runners**.

A high and continual level of communication is essential for moving the story from boards to design to final animation smoothly [and on schedule]!

Who Do I Affect?

Art Directors affect the entire design team because they are the ones creating the entire style of the show!

Their choices and aesthetics need to be articulated in a way that **allows the other designers to successfully match it.**

Who Do I Affect?

The Vendor studio is heavily affected by the Art Director because they will rely entirely on the design information provided by the Art Director in order to animate the episodes and create the additional backgrounds.

It is for this reason that the Art Director's Style guide is very important.

Same Show, New Art Director

So... what happens when a show's art director moves on to a different project?

This is not unheard of, especially on shows that run for a high number of seasons.

In cases like this, the Art Director will need to select and train up a replacement Art Director to take over their role. Since by the point that this usually happens, the show tends to be several seasons in and have a lot of the style and design decisions already in place, the Art Director who comes in works primarily to maintain the foundation the original Art director created.

Advice for the Aspiring Art Director

If your dream is to become an art director, here are some helpful tips and things to keep in mind!

Of course,
EVERY SINGLE THING HERE
IS SUBJECTIVE and no two
Art Directors have the same path.

Sharpen Your Skills

As with most managerial positions, an Art Director is rarely [if ever] a first time job. Often times, Art Directors are experienced designers with various professional work experience under their belt.

If you are a designer hoping to jump into AD, really honing your design skills is key. Creating a library of professional work and experience that shows your capabilities will allow for a Show Runner to see what you are capable of.

Hone your Point of View

Another good thing to start doing as you progress in your design journey is really honing your unique point of view.

How do **you** design when you have no instruction?

Working on personal projects and bringing something through a self-enforced visual development process is a good way to flex these muscles and showcase your unique design voice and sensibilities.

Be Observant

The jump from the being a designer to being an Art Director can be jarring if you are not familiar with the way the different aspects of the production pipeline [especially the design pipeline] intersect and affect each other.

At each of your studio jobs, really observe how the different departments link together and try to soak up as much as you can about the way the Art Directors your work with operate.

Practice Communication

As with all the managerial and director positions in the TV animation pipeline, being an Art Director involves a massive amount of communication.

Art Directors have to work directly with leadership from nearly every department, navigate notes and delegate tasks effectively.

Practicing your communication skills and interpersonal skills is a good thing to start thinking of if you are trying to go into Art Directing.

Multi-tasking and Organization

Because Art Directors need to work on several episodes at once and create strategies for tackling all of their tasks as efficiently as possible, practicing your organizational and multi-tasking skills is another good way to prepare yourself for this role.

Vocalize Interest

Something to also keep in mind if you are a designer at a studio who has an interest in becoming an Art Director is to vocalize your interest!

Especially if you have been at a studio for a while working on multiple projects, expressing your interest in eventually moving into Art Direction is a good way to plant that seed.

The good relationships you build up at the studios you work for are a great way to show both A) you can do the work and B) you are someone people want to work with!

Your Own Direction

While all of these suggestions are good practices, none of them are guaranteed methods to become an Art Director.

As with most leadership positions, they typically require someone [be it a person or a studio] to take a chance on you, understanding that it IS your first time doing the role...and you will definitely make mistakes and grow as you go.

HOWEVER! Really presenting yourself and your work in the best light possible and making sure you are knowledgeable and open-minded will allow you to be ready to soar when the opportunity presents itself!

**And that's all
I've got!**

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