Case Study: Visual Merchandiser - Kevin

What do you do?
I build and paint props that go into a department store window in order to help sell merchandise.

What is your background?
I didn’t have a particularly arty background. I left school with a set of A levels. I then went down to London and did a general retailing course in a department store before moving back up to Nottingham as a sales assistant. I worked in various departments such as furniture and lighting and in doing that, I enjoyed putting colours together. I wanted to move on from that and do something a bit more creative and arty and also get a career. Then a job in display came up and I just went for it.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?
You need a general interest in design, and an eye for colour and design issues. You need to know what goes with what to get the look right. You also need skills in problem-solving, time-management and computer skills because more and more of our work is being done using computer graphics.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?
You could use the skills of a visual merchandiser to do freelance visual merchandising, interior design or exhibition freelance work.

What changes will there be in the future?
Eventually, we are looking into using more photography and computer-aided design within displays.

Personally, I'd like to move into management and I'd like to do more design work rather than actually building displays.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?
Making sure that your display is ready by the set date is a challenge. You need to have everything prepared and you also need to orchestrate everybody else, for example, electricians, shop floor staff, who provide the merchandise, and goods handlers, who move the heavy items for us. We need to make sure that they're all ready in the same place when we want them.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?
There are not that many opportunities. It's a very competitive environment so you have to show real enthusiasm and make sure it's really what you want to do.

What do you like about your job?
I like the fact that it's never the same, there's always something different to do. You're working with so many different types of merchandise, there are always different ways of looking at things.

It's also nice when you actually see something that you've worked on personally, perhaps a design that you've worked on, and you see the finished article in the window. It's almost like a work of art.

And, I like thinking of new ideas and designs and coming up with a different way of handling merchandise and showing it off to its best advantage.
What do you dislike about your job?

I don't like it when managers allow personal preference to colour their view of your display. It deflates you when it's something that you've worked on.

I also dislike it when displays that you thought were a good idea at the time and look good on paper, don't end up how you really wanted them to.

And, I dislike it when you know exactly what you want to do, but you're let down by the merchandise - you've got an idea of what you want to see but it just doesn't happen, perhaps because the merchandise is out of stock and it can't be got hold of in time for you.

What are your ambitions?

I'd like to move into display management, becoming more responsible for design work rather than the actual hands-on work. I'd also like to go into freelancing or exhibition work.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

My advice would be to keep up with new ideas and trends, buy magazines and keep your eyes open for new ideas all the time within fashion. Learn some practical skills like carpentry, painting and computer skills because we are using computers more and more.

A day in the life

8:30 am - 8:35 am
Team briefing with department manager to go through the day and week ahead, ie, holiday rotas and meetings.

8:35 am - 9:00 am
Section team meeting with section manager to go through window plans, workload and any individual jobs that may have cropped up.

9:00 am - 9:20 am
Check current displays.

9:20 am - 9:45 am
Go through own window plans and draw up a work list for the next two weeks.

9:45 am - 10:15 am
Sort out wood, paint and tools ready to begin construction of a display.

10:15 am - 10:35 am
Coffee break.

10:35 am - 12:45 pm
Begin construction of a display.

12:45 pm - 1:45 pm
Lunch.

1:45 pm - 3:00 pm
Carry on with construction and begin painting.

3:00 pm - 3:30 pm
Visit department manager of the window display that I'm working on and go through plans with them. Agree on a time and date to look at the merchandise selected.

3:30 pm - 5:10 pm
Continue with window display.

5:10 pm - 5:30 pm
Tidy studio and put tools away.