

# The Studio

## OF DANIEL PINKHAM

By Sara Gilbert

Fifteen years ago, Dan Pinkham had what might be described as the ideal studio situation. "It was beautiful," he says about the studio he built in Palos Verdes Estates in Los Angeles, California, in 1985. "It had perfect north light. I thought it would be my last studio."

That was before Pinkham and his wife Vicki discovered an abandoned gatehouse in an incredible location. It was just across the street from the Pacific Ocean, with an incredible view of the water, and was in a great neighborhood. But it had no roof and no foundation. Only a few walls were still standing. In fact, it was in such a state of disrepair that it had been condemned by the city and was about to be bulldozed.

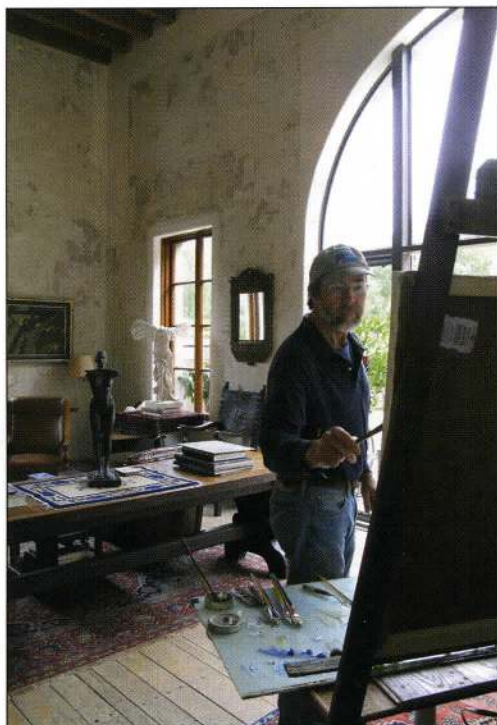
The couple was intrigued by the building and took a tour of the property. It didn't take long for them to decide that they didn't want it. "It was too big a job for us," Pinkham says. "There were several factors, but we both walked away saying it wouldn't work."

Back at his beautiful studio just five miles away, however, Pinkham couldn't get comfortable with that decision. "I didn't feel at peace with saying no," he admits. He decided to pray about it, and to turn to scripture. He opened his Bible, placed his hand on the page and looked down to read, "The stone and rubble other builders have discarded, I will make my cornerstone and it will be good in the eyes of all."

Then the phone rang. Vicki, who had left for her job as a flight attendant, was calling from the airport to say that she had been thinking. They had to get the house, she told her husband. "I just laughed and said, 'You won't believe what just happened to me,'" Pinkham says. "So that's when we decided to buy it."

Four months later, on May 22, 1998, they finished the paperwork and took ownership of the property. That evening, they drove down to the house. "It was rainy and windy, and as we stood on the corner looking at it, we thought it might just blow down," Pinkham says. "But then we heard a squeak and looked up to see an old man approaching on a bicycle."

The man stopped next to the couple and mentioned how glad he was that the building had sold. Then he looked at them and said, "You're the new owners of this place, aren't you? You're those two artists who bought it, right? Isn't that just the way it's supposed to be?" When they looked surprised, the man told the Pinkhams that the building they had just purchased was an old chapel, built as an exact replica of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian chapel that Michelangelo had lived in while he was painting the Sistine Chapel.







"Then he said, 'I'm sure my wife is worrying about me out here in the rain—I've gotta go!' and he rode away," Pinkham says. "We never saw him again."

Whoever he was, that mysterious man and his strange message confirmed the Pinkhams' commitment to rebuilding the house. It also provided the direction they needed as to how to rebuild it. So for the 15 years since then—and for what Pinkham expects to be at least another three years—they've been slowly restoring the structure as authentically as they can. "We're trying to be as true to it as possible," Pinkham says.

It isn't easy to furnish a modern home and studio as it would have been in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. "It's interesting how difficult it is to retain that spirit with all of the choices available now," Pinkham says. "There are so many new periods of furniture, so much more to choose from."

But the Pinkhams had help there, too. They were friends with the ancestors of Frank Vanderlip, a banking tycoon from the East Coast who had come to California in 1913, bought the entire Palos Verdes peninsula, and orchestrated the construction of this chapel on the coast. Although Vanderlip and his business partners went bankrupt, when the stock market crashed in 1929, he furnished the chapel with handmade furniture direct from Italy. And much of that furniture was, in the early 2000s, stored in a cottage owned by his family.



Today, 23 of those pieces belong to the Pinkhams, who purchased them from the Vanderlips. "Our kitchen table is from 1463," Pinkham says. "The pieces we have range from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 1600s. One is from the 1000s. There's a lot of variety."

Several of those pieces have found a home in the studio that both Dan and Vicki now work in: a Renaissance-era mirror, a long, narrow table from an Italian monastery, a folding chair from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and an 11-foot altar on which Pinkham displays a rugged cross, as well as his own Bible. Although he doesn't have an authentic 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian easel, he made his own version that fits the space. "It's not a modern, crank easel," he says. "It's the same style Rembrandt used, what you would see in a self-portrait of Rembrandt."

Those pieces, paired with the exposed, hand-hewn beams stretching across the ceiling and the chipped, antique walls, give the 20- by-30 square-foot studio a humble, spiritual feeling that almost everyone who enters senses immediately. "Everyone who walks in the front door does a slight gasp," Pinkham says. "It's not big and it's not glamorous, but it has the feeling of a sanctuary."

The Pinkhams intentionally used the original chapel room for their studio, even though it is situated at the front of the house, where all guests enter the home. Although that can occasionally be distracting, Pinkham has happily endured it for the past 14 years, thanks in part to the 19-foot ceilings. "The high ceilings elevate my artistic spirit and my creativity as well," he says. "There's a calmness, a quiet presence. It's like a retreat."

Someday, that's exactly what it will be. When they started the process of restoring the building, the Pinkhams realized







that the work they were putting into it would outlive them. That's when they decided to initiate the necessary paperwork to leave the property as a small nonprofit foundation for the arts. When they are gone, the Pinkham Foundation for the Arts will live on.

On the day the couple took ownership of the abandoned gatehouse, they stood in the roofless building and watched a mouse with its tail stuck in a trap skitter across


the floor. That day, they caught 12 mice—in the kitchen alone.

With the help of Pinkham's nephew, a builder, the couple rebuilt all of the exterior walls, replaced the floors, re-roofed the structure, and restored the fountains in the courtyard. They jacked up the entire house and spent nine months digging out a basement under the building to make a usable space for a frame shop. Of the original property, all that remains now is the floor plan

and a few original walls. "Everything else is gone," Pinkham says. "We basically built a box around what was left."

There is still work to be done. In September, they started remodeling the main room on the second story of their home into additional studio space. Although Pinkham plans to continue working in the main studio on the first floor, the second space will allow Vicki to have a separate studio of her own. It also will eventually provide exhibition and classroom space.

Pinkham has another project in progress in his own studio. He's been working on a pair of 5-by-16-foot murals replicating the Sistine Chapel that will soon hang around the top of the ceiling. It's an ode to Michelangelo, whose long-ago studio space inspired the original building.

"I tacked it up just to see how it will look," he says. "Then I got down and looked up—and it dropped me to my knees. It transforms the whole spirit of this room. The house will be a work of art itself," he adds. "I'm just the facilitator, truly. I just have to get out of the way and let it happen here." 

*Sara Gilbert is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.*



*Sublime Moment, oil, 40" by 48"*