

DANIEL W. PINKHAM

INTELLECTUAL MODERN IMPRESSIONISM

BY JOHN GERAGHTY

Before beginning to define the title of this article, I need to introduce you to my friend Dan Pinkham.

Dan like most children at a young age scribbled carelessly or meaninglessly on most any blank sheet of paper he was given; his mother, father, and two considerably older siblings encouraged him at that point, certainly to keep him occupied.

Dan recalls a specific incident, which he feels was a defining experience, while visiting their next-door neighbor for his treats of Oreos and milk; he was introduced to their houseguest, Sister Camille, a nun dressed in her habit seated at a painting easel. As usual, Dan had his drawing pad and pencils with him and proudly shared his images of the family dog and other concepts within the pages. Her response to his efforts was, of course, very encouraging.

There was a distinct odor that, in later years, he has identified as Grumbacher Oil Painting Medium III; the vibrancy of Sister Camille's color palette had stimulated his mind and captivated his imagination. Her personal attention to this young boy created a sense of comfort and attachment. She invited Dan back the next day, offering to paint his

portrait. He was to wear his favorite shirt; Dan appeared the next day in his favorite outfit—his Superman suit. Dan spent considerable time with Sister Camille before she returned to her home; she encouraged his interest in art and was convinced he had a gift that should be nurtured. Dan's mother and father later arranged for private art instruction throughout his preteen years.

In elementary school Dan was identified as the class artist, chosen to illustrate various school events on the blackboard. He specifically remembers the time in the sixth grade when his teacher assigned him to create two large murals for the school. He escaped from schoolwork for four hours a day to draw with pastels, while his classmates were studying and envying him. It just doesn't get any better than that.

At this point in his life Dan had become driven and pertinacious about his future in art. He had his responsibilities and chores, which he accomplished under the strict rules set forth by his mother, and after high school began working with his father at the family plumbing business.

To continue his aspirations of becoming a professional artist, at the age of 20, Dan entered Art Center College of Design, majoring

in illustration. He drastically improved his drawing skills, his understanding of the basic components of composition and design; he learned discipline and work ethic. His paintings were rapidly improving and the demand for his work was increasing.

Unfortunately Dan's father became seriously ill, with little to no insurance, medical bills were placing the family in financial difficulty. During his fourth semester at the Art Center, Dan found it necessary to set aside his dreams and he returned to the family's plumbing business.

During his time at the Art Center Dan





Dan and Vicki Pinkham in the studio.

had become close friends with Don Putman, a highly respected professional artist and instructor at the school. They had spent hours discussing art, painting, music, poetry and the interaction and inclusion of the arts within the artist's composition. Dan had shared with Don the spiritual relationship he felt with nature and the environment, and his struggle to introduce this into his own work; it was the singular most important component missing from his academic training.

Don's response was: *If you wish to see the reds in the eye sockets like Rembrandt, or*

greens on the foreheads like Van Gogh, and reach within your heart and soul for all the potential that is within you, other than God and prayer there is only one person capable of effectuating this passion and enlightenment, that is the Russian Master painter and instructor Sergei Bongart (1918-1985).

After leaving the Art Center Dan contacted Sergei, made an appointment, walked into Sergei Bongart's studio on Second Street in Santa Monica, showed the Russian master a portfolio of his work, and asked if he could study with him. Sergei, in his compelling,

heavily accented broken English stated: *You have talent and potential, I will allow you to take some courses and we will see the results and then discuss the possibilities for the future.*

Dan jumped at the opportunity and selected the class times that he thought would fit with his responsibilities of the family business. Within only a few weeks he found the instruction so intense and time-consuming, he could not keep up with the curriculum. Dan approached Sergei to seek counsel and was admonished for neglecting his God-given talent for the life of a plumber and told to leave his studio.

Dan, although totally dedicated to running the family business, continued to paint in his spare time, which brought peace and meaning to his life.

After a prolonged illness of several years, his father, in his final days, requested that Dan continue his art career upon his passing. With the family's blessing, Dan dismissed the employees, disposed of the service trucks, equipment and inventory, and began his life anew.

Dan's training began as a child with his introduction to Sister Camille; at age 28, he was determined to again approach Sergei Bongart to continue his dream. Dan was convinced Sergei was the only person who could connect his childhood artistic impressions with his adult aspirations and cultivate the sensitivity and higher levels of aestheticism he believed was missing from his work.

Sergei had purchased property in Rexburg, Idaho, and opened a larger art school. With little more than a knapsack hung over his shoulder, and some art supplies and encouragement from family and friends, Dan was off to Rexburg. When the bus stopped in town he had no idea where the school was located. Fortunately he encountered another young man on his way to observe a demonstration by Sergei, and the man offered Dan a ride.

Upon arriving Dan went to the back door of what appeared to be a very large log building and, as quietly as possible, slipped into the class. Everything was dead silent as Sergei was painting a large canvas on stage; there must have been at least 125 people in the audience. Sergei stopped painting, set down his brushes and asked: *Who is it that has interrupted me?* Everyone in the class remained dead silent as he stepped off the stage and made his way to the rear of the building, where he found Dan Pinkham standing in pure shock being approached by the master after their last encounter. He had not taken the time to clean up after the long trip or prepare himself for such an encounter.

Sergei walked straight up to Dan, who stood alone at the rear of the building, and with his compelling deep voice said: *Now you have come to paint.* He looked Dan straight in the eye and said: *You will have a five-year full scholarship. I will provide you the wings to soar—it will be your determination and personal volition as to how high.*

Dan felt as though everyone in this large building was focused on him, contemplating



The Pinkham home and studio.

an encounter from the rash of the master, which transformed into the return of the prodigal son, providing him the opportunity of a lifetime.

Dan's first year with Sergei was intensive, devoted entirely to working in black and white, an experience that led to his superb management of lights and darks, of masses and vacuums. His work was critiqued regularly by the master, and although they became the closest of friends, Dan continued to recognize and respect Sergei as the great international master.

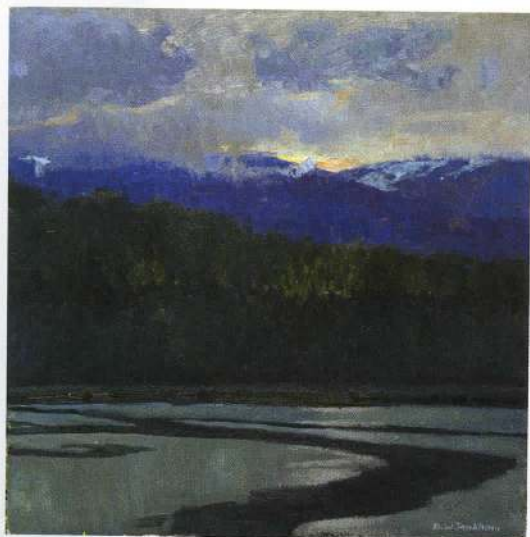
Sergei taught Dan much more than technique. From the experience of viewing Sergei's first work, Dan felt "He was more me than I was; he created a form of expression and vocabulary that spoke to my spirit and soul." He taught Dan how to observe, to see, to become

part of nature and the environment, to become one within his spirit and his relationship with his subject, to transform himself into that uniquely special place he had chosen to paint and share this remarkable experience with you and me. Sergei taught Dan to paint what he felt—more than what he observed—the warmth of the summer sun, and the chill from the cold of a winter scene.

Often when working in plein air and awaiting the perfect moment when the sun and shadows are most effective, Dan will contemplate the moment, record his thoughts of what has brought him to this choice of subject and precisely what he wishes to capture or record, and this process helps him to focus and become part of this special time and place.



Dan's studio, which fills with natural sunlight.



Hope in Truth, oil, 36 x 36"



Dawn's Peace, oil, 40 x 60"

Sergei Bongart was a person of perseverance, profound philosophy and good humor. He was original, his showmanship legendary, his anecdotes are still being recited, his paintings and poetry have flourished with genius. He continues to live on through Dan Pinkham and hundreds of others who were fortunate to have known him.

Transformed by the doctrine and immersion of these five years, Dan returned to Southern California and opened his own art school to share his experiences and expertise. During this time he founded the Plein Air Artists of California. The group included Amy Sidrane, Ted Pressett, Bill Perkins, and R.S. Riddick; they traveled, painted and exhibited together in focused themed exhibitions in such venues as the Monterey Museum of Art. Although Dan enjoyed teaching, after five years of directing his art school he made the decision he needed more time for his creative work. He was ready to travel and headed for Europe with his fellow Plein Air Artists of California members. There he immersed himself in the study of the great works of the past masters. Upon their return, the group spearheaded an artistic movement, known as "Plein Air Painting," which has since grown internationally.

In 1988 a mutual friend had introduced Vicki Thorpe to Dan Pinkham over coffee. Vicki graduated from California State University, Dominguez Hills, with a degree in studio

art. She was also an artist and employed as a stewardess with American Airlines. Today they both admit this was one of the more important days of their lives. Unfortunately, Vicki was packed and ready for a move north to Los Gatos, California, and Dan had plans to leave for an extended trip to Russia. It was divine provenance that must have brought them together at a shopping mall in Palos Verdes, California, one year later. Vicki had returned to Southern California and Dan from his Russian adventure. Dan immediately arranged a date and they began seeing each other regularly. In 1992 they were married. Fortunately, Vicki, who was also an inveterate traveler and artist, had begun traveling throughout the American Southwest, Europe, and New England with Dan at least six months out of the year.

Dan converted a secondhand Dodge U-Haul truck into a traveling studio and mobile home with all the essential living amenities, a full-size freezer and refrigerator, a walk-in shower plumbed by an expert, and a 360-degree panoramic view that would instantly appear when the back door was lifted and the hidden window panels removed.

The frequency and duration of these special times lessened in 1998 with the purchase of part of a unique historical property in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. It was a challenging undertaking in restoration and conservation for both Vicki and Dan.

In 1913 the New York financier Frank Vanderlip, president of the National Bank of New York, purchased the 16,000-acre pristine, scenic Peninsula of Rancho Palos Verdes, which overlooked the Pacific Ocean, for the inordinate price of \$1.5 million. Vanderlip then commissioned the famous Olmsted Brothers architectural firm out of Massachusetts to design an Italianate residential community. The project was abandoned before completion during the crash of 1929.

Dan and Vicki purchased one of the 20 structures that Vanderlip built—the former gatehouse based on the designs of a roadside chapel outside the Vatican that Michelangelo had occupied while he painted the Sistine Chapel. The structure was in ruin; all that remained was the thick plaster walls and a floor that would require demolition. The city had planned to bulldoze it.

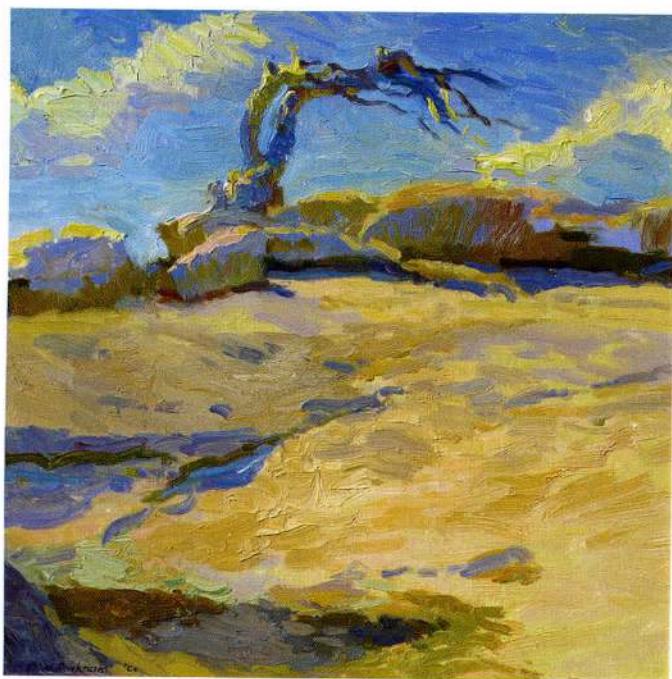
The building appealed to Dan and Vicki not only for its historical value and its 19-foot ceilings, but it was also positioned directly across a narrow road from Portuguese Point, where 250-foot cliffs drop precipitously into the Pacific Ocean—one of the more spectacular views of the entire Southern California coastline.

Dan's nephew—a builder—and Dan and Vicki have worked over the past 14 years restoring the building, which has required a complete foundation, reinforcement of the plaster walls—a careful restoration of the entire structure guided by old photographs and records stored within the city archives. This has become their home, a true labor of love, even many of the furnishings are from the same time period, some acquired from the Vanderlip family. The gardens and water fountain have been beautifully restored and numerous trees have been planted.

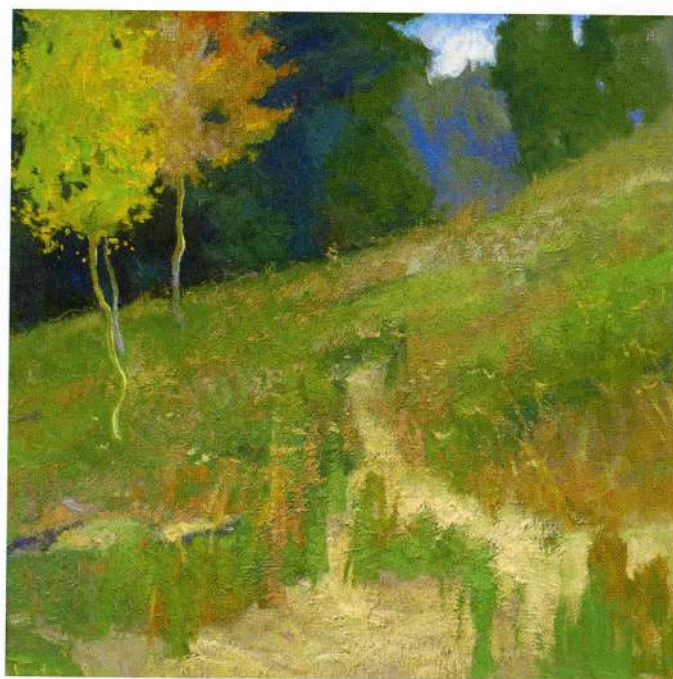
Dan and Vicki are currently forming a non-profit foundation, the Pinkham Foundation for the Arts. They have gifted their home to the Pinkham Foundation for the Arts, an organization that will be committed to creating and maintaining an environment that fosters interest in fine art and architecture. The foundation will be responsible for the display and preservation of paintings of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony and the Pinkham's private collection of paintings, bronzes and extensive art library. Plans are being formed to include artist-in-residence programs, workshops, lectures, special art exhibitions and tours of



Light is Given, oil, 12 x 16"



Jeffrey Pine, Yosemite, oil, 16 x 16"



Trail Less Traveled, oil, 24 x 24"

this historical home.

Dan's passion for the land, especially in his native California, has led him to become one of the founders of the Land Conservancy Movement. He spends considerable time working for the preservation of open land in his hometown of Palos Verdes. Between the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony and other artist friends, they have raised several million dollars through local art exhibitions and sales, which has provided the Land Conservancy the ability to purchase large tracts of land protecting it from future development forever.

Dan is also an active board member of the historical California Art Club and is the committee chairman of a mentoring program that works closely with young, promising artists and those who are emerging. Dan and his committee of seasoned artists find this interaction an extremely rewarding experience.

Dan and Vicki have retired their faithful old Dodge van; however, continue to travel at every opportunity. They look forward to meeting each year with their artist friends; his visits with his close friend and mentor, sculptor and painter George Carlson, is always a special time. They share similar philosophies, and enjoy working together with compatriots Clyde Aspevig, T. Allen Lawson, and Len Chmiel.

Upon introducing the *Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale*,

Dan Pinkham was one of the first artists that came to mind; I wanted to introduce a new expansive definition of American art to the Southern California audience, something more than horses, cattle, cowboys and Indians. The work of Dan Pinkham has, over the years, provided this diversity and a high level of credibility that we have built upon. Dan is highly respected by his peers, and has touched the lives of so many young artists through shared philosophy and life experiences.

In closing, some thoughts from Dan Pinkham:

"Vicki, my wife and soul partner, represents all the ideals I believe in. I have learned a great deal from her. She is one more example of God working his divine plan within my life. If people really care to know what inspires me, what leads me, what gets me up each day, it is in part that I had supportive parents, and that I was born happy and love humor. The other part is my relationship with God. In my private life I enjoy reading and studying scripture, especially Christ's message in the New Testament.

"Having the opportunity to exercise my gift and watching my work grow as I grow personally is a blessing. I believe the true use of art is to help the artist develop their own spiritual nature and then present that

nature through their art for all humanity to enjoy. I believe for work to grow one must mature spiritually, every element of a person's character reveals itself in the surface of his or her painting. Regardless of the subject, every brushstroke, texture and nuance is a direct reflection. So much of my study has taken place in the great museums of the world. I have been reminded by artists who lived hundreds of years ago about divine character. In the treatment on the surface they share more about themselves than they could possibly do verbally. So, for me, my honesty and sensitivity on canvas won't grow unless it is first reflected in my own life. It is hard work—painful at times—however compromise is never an option."

The paintings of Dan Pinkham are represented by American Legacy Fine Arts in Pasadena, California. 🏡

About John Geraghty

John Geraghty, Trustee and Special Advisor to the Autry National Center's Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale, shares his insights on the Western art scene. Both he and wife Saralynn are afflicted with the incurable passion of collecting Western art.

