

THE MAGAZINE  
FOR PASTEL ARTISTS

**Sell Your Art:** Guide to Summer Fairs

# The Pastel Journal

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## Paint Dazzling Water

Greek Isles, Rocky Coasts and Inland Waters



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*Reflections of Mykonos (detail; 16 x 24) by Milton Meyer*

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# Elizabeth Sandia

Listening to an inner voice led this artist  
across the country to paint landscapes  
that speak of and to the soul.

By Michael Chesley Johnson

ONCE AGAIN ELIZABETH SANDIA is living in a month-to-month rental filled with boxes. "I woke up one morning and decided it was time to move," says the artist who's lived in cities across the United States and Canada. This time she's seeking the ideal studio.

"When I started painting, I bought a mobile home that would give me enough space to paint in, I thought, but the effective painting space turned out to be only about 3x4 feet. It was too small." Sandia then moved into another residence, which she bought because of a large family room that seemed perfect for a studio. The room, however, proved to have too much light. "I put the house on the market in June, had it under contract several months later and closed on it in January."

Following an inner voice has been a lifelong pursuit for Sandia. When she was growing up in New York City, something inside her told her to become an artist. As the daughter of a Chinatown minister, she didn't have a clue where to begin, but fortuitously ended up at the High School of Art and Design (New York City). She went on to receive a degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology and became a successful art director for the well-known Gray Advertising firm, where she worked with clients such as Newport Cigarettes and the Ford Motor Company.

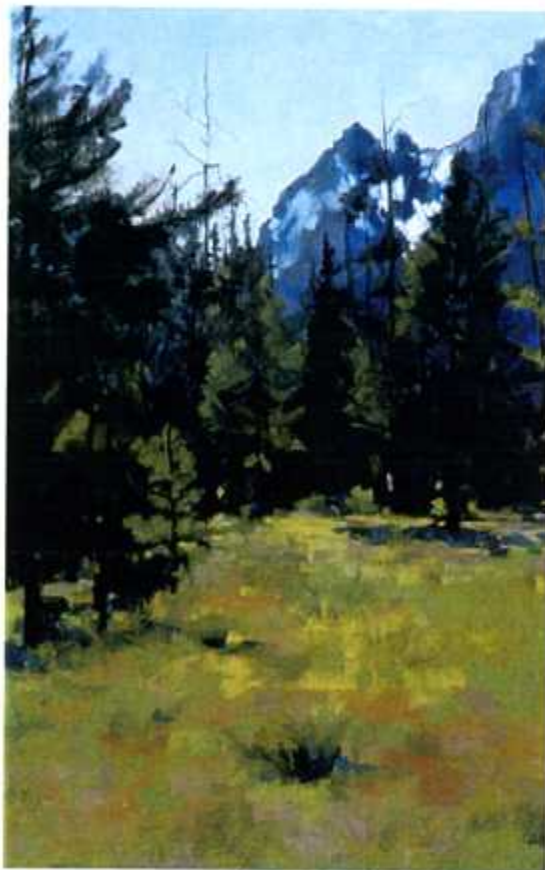
### An Artist's Journey

"It was a funny time [the '70s] in New York for advertising," she says, and after awhile she realized she needed a change. She quit Gray and went to Key West, Florida, where a friend had a second home, to think about her future. While there, she met a Canadian on the beach, a military man, whom she eventually married and moved with to Nova Scotia.

After her stint in Florida, Sandia found that Nova Scotia didn't agree with her. "It was too isolated, and I was always waiting for summer to come." The couple then moved to Ottawa, but as an American unable to achieve landed immigrant status, Sandia was not allowed to work. "I was floundering," she says. What's more, she began to miss her artistic self. Unfortunately, her husband wanted a traditional wife. "My husband told me that I never needed to work again, that he could support me. So I began to live a more 'conventional' life. I had to learn to be 'normal,' not odd or artistic."

During this difficult period, Sandia suffered a pinched nerve in her right hand. "I underwent physical therapy and took heavy meds for the pain," she explains. "One day, out of desperation, I said, 'God, I'll never deny that I'm an artist again if you let my hand work once more.'" A week later, with the help of a chiropractor, Sandia once again had use of her hand. "I needed that little wake-up call to tell me that I was not honoring my life."

To reclaim her identity and her talents, Sandia decided to move back into art.



*Sangre De Cristo Valley (opposite, 24x30) and Meadow (above, 16x12)*



**Elizabeth Sandia**

in a way, by studying architecture. She graduated with honors in interior design from Algonquin College in Ottawa, and afterward taught drafting and presentation there.

Two years later she and her husband returned to Key West, but ended up divorcing. She went to work

for another architectural firm and began freelancing as well, eventually building up her own successful architectural design practice.

### The First Leap

One day, out of the blue she signed up for a watercolor course with Jeanne Dobie. "Even though I was terrible at it, a little voice told me to become a painter." At the time, Sandia also read Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (1992, Tarcher Putnam) and followed Cameron's practice of writing three pages every morning. "This exercise revealed to me that, as an architect, I missed color; something was incomplete. You get into trouble when you don't honor who you are." In addition, Dobie's workshop had shown her that she loved being around other artists.

Although Sandia's business was thriving and she was painting on the side, Key West ultimately proved to be an inhospitable environment for her physically. The warm, humid climate means there's a lot of

At the time, she had no idea of making any money at art, but she liked the city because it had a community of artists and she felt comfortable among them. Also, with her love of architecture, the city was a natural choice. "Santa Fe has adobe homes, beautiful casitas, which key into my architectural background."

### The Right Place at the Right Time

"Coming to Santa Fe was an act of faith and the result of following an inner guide. I met all the right people, and it all happened," Sandia says. "It's one of those things that happen when you listen and follow [the little voice inside]."

One of the "right people" Sandia met was painter Albert Handell. While inquiring about his workshops in Ventana Fine Art, a Santa Fe gallery that represents his work, Sandia happened to meet the man himself. Immediately she signed up for classes in his studio—planning to focus on oil painting.

"The first night, one of the other artists in the class invited me to her studio. When I got there, she sat me down with a box of Yarka pastels. That was a 'wow' experience! I loved the colors and the feel. The following Wednesday, I told Albert to forget about oil; I wanted to learn pastel."

During her first two years of pastel painting, Sandia honed her technical skills. "I recommend that students get over the battle of learning technique and discovering materials early on, so they can focus on 'getting the feeling right' in the painting," Sandia doesn't think of the process of painting at all these days, but simply works toward a vision of what the painting is to become.

Starting with a piece of vine charcoal, she sketches what she calls a modified value study. "I lay in the general shapes, telling myself what needs to be dark or light." Next, she uses an old, dry watercolor wash brush to dust off the sketch, leaving a "ghost drawing" to function as a guide. "The exercise of putting these

shapes down helps me figure out where the painting will go."

She makes no preliminary sketches. "As a designer, I'm comfortable with figuring out my design on the fly. I have to do it this way, since all my energy goes into the first moments. If I have to make a sketch, I lose steam." Sandia continues either by blocking in the darks or, if working outdoors under rapidly changing light, by pinning down the center of interest accurately in both value and color before moving on. "I try to render the specialness and



Little Church in Placita (9x12)

mold in the air—mold that can cause serious medical problems. "I became so ill I could hardly think straight," she explains. "I was in bed 20 hours a day."

Soon after discovering the mold problem, Sandia saw a PBS series on writer Joseph Campbell, the noted authority on Carl Jung. "I heard Campbell say, 'Don't worry about money; go for your dreams.' At that point, I decided to move, but I had no plans, no ideas." As a consequence, she spent a year traveling to various cities, looking for the right place to move her architectural business. One city was Santa Fe.



the subtlety of what's before me in one part before working on another."

If she works on a large surface, she may use Turpenoid to dissolve the pastel and cover white areas quickly. "I love the drips and the brushstrokes showing through." She keeps her layering process loose, but as she approaches the final layers, she carefully cleans off the pastels with a rag before applying color, to ensure clean strokes at the end.

Although she keeps her pastels carefully ordered on a wheeled cabinet she custom-built—lights at the top, darks at the bottom, greens and yellows on the left, violets and blues on the right—Sandia refuses to replace each stick in its designated spot as she paints. "That may work for some artists," she says, "but not for me. It's too disruptive." Instead, she places the sticks she's using on the box's rim, where they're easy to find again.

She prefers the very softest pastels, such as Schmincke, Unison and Great American Art Works, but she also occasionally uses harder Nupastels for blending. "I carry about 800 colors from all these sets. I need so many sticks because even if two colors are close, they're different enough that I'll need both of them," Sandia explains.

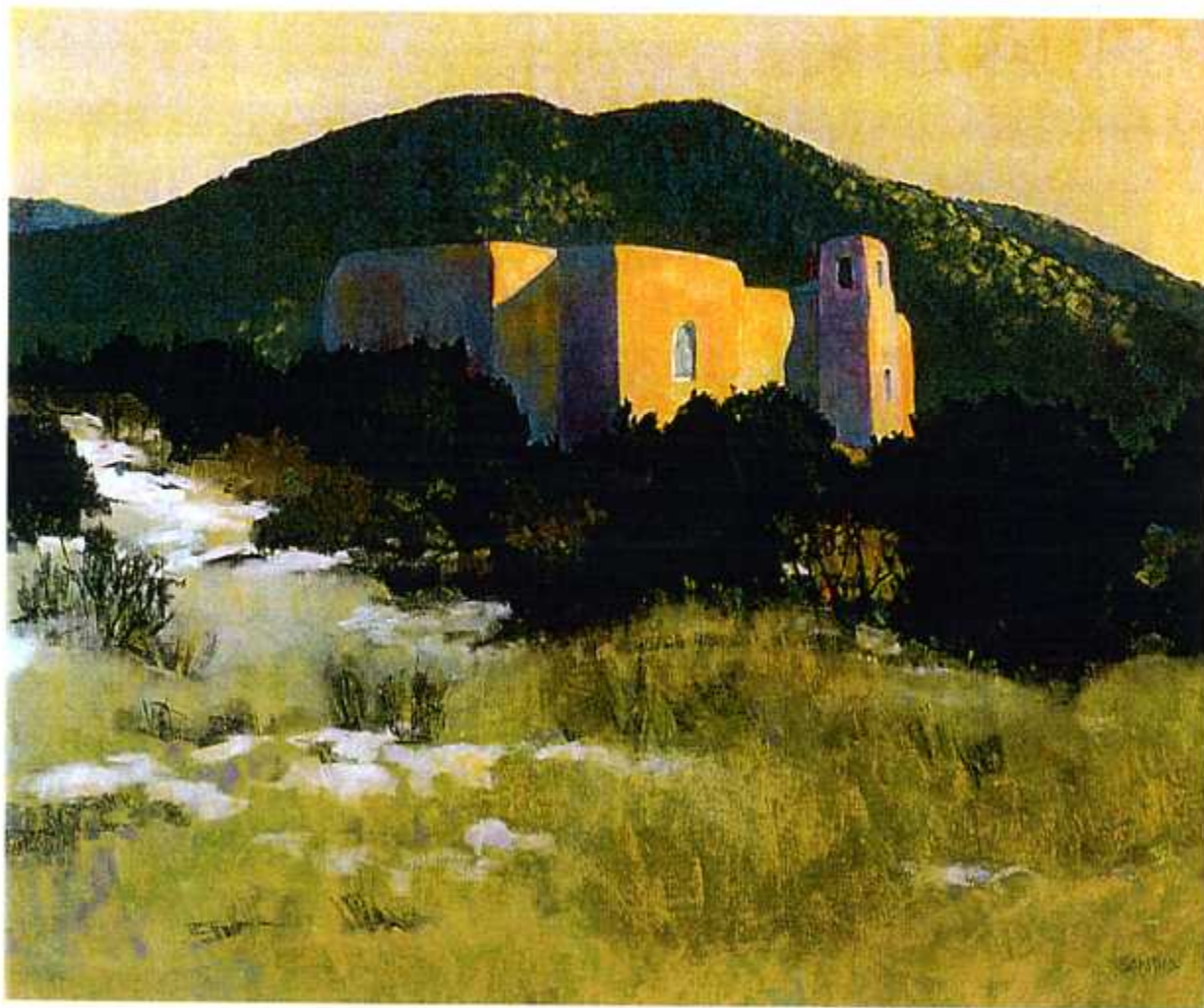
### Mother of All Easels

As we're talking, Sandia pulls a brochure for a Hughes 4000 counterbalanced easel from one of her moving boxes. "My pride and joy," she says. This 170-lb. Steinway among easels is double-masted and requires a high ceiling. Her previous home had a 20x30-foot family room with a high ceiling, a perfect fit for the easel. "That room was going to be my studio," she says, "but it never became the place I intended it to be. It had too much light. I couldn't block enough sunlight."

Instead, she turned a bedroom into a studio. "The room was originally a creamy off-white, but I painted it a midtone gray, which allowed me to see color and value more accurately. You always think of studios as being white, but white studios can be just too bright." The room also had north light, but this, she says, isn't important to her, since she always covers up windows and works by artificial light. In her former studio, she ritually began by closing the blinds, turning on her two Verilux, color- and temperature-corrected lamps next to her Hughes easel and switching on her stereo to hear Mozart.

With small reference paintings or photos on one of the easel's masts, the other held her painting

*Ranchos De Taos  
Church in Moonlight*  
(8x10)



*Sacred Jewel-Golden, New Mexico* (at right, 18x22) and *Winter Moonlight* (below, 12x12)



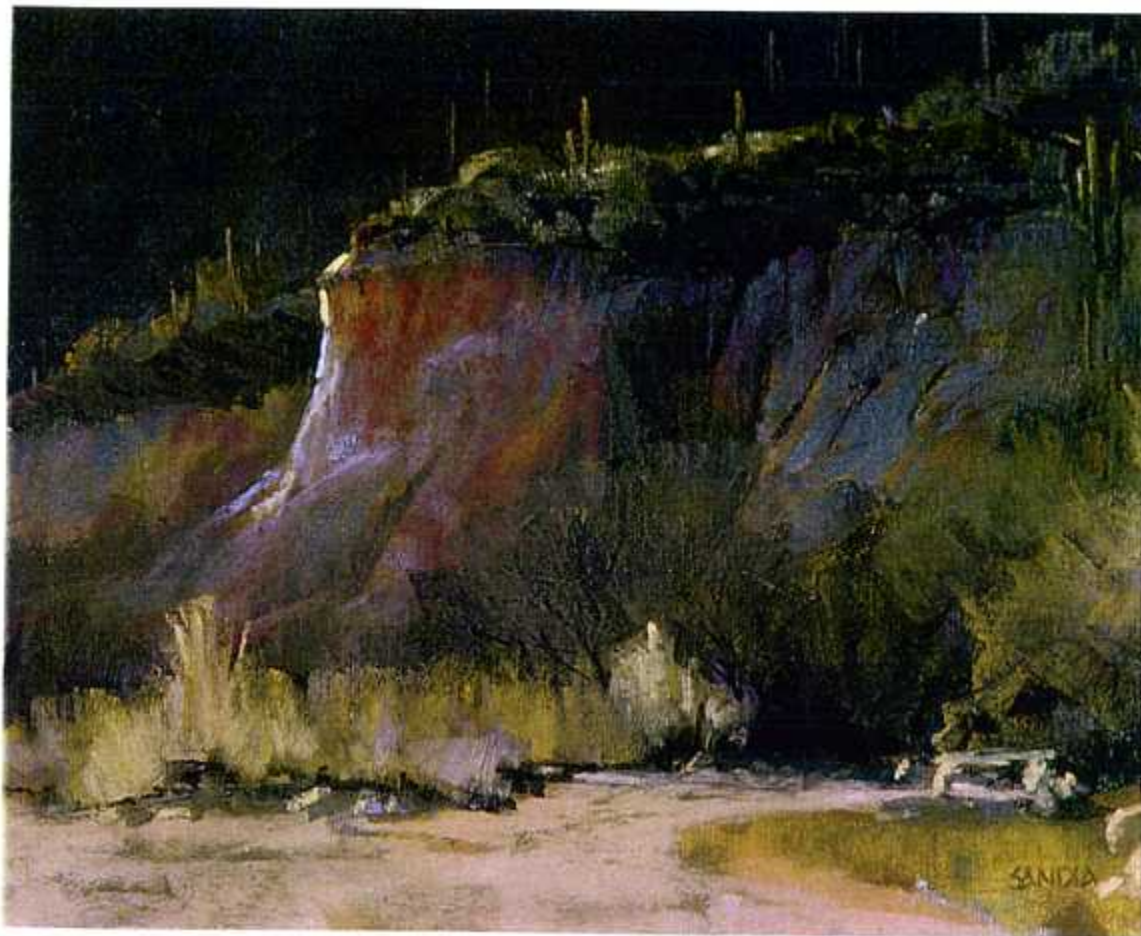
surface—a piece of Wallis sanded paper either taped to foam board (for small paintings) or drymounted to Gatorboard (for larger ones). Beneath her feet was a bit of carpet to catch falling pastels—she admits to dropping her sticks quite a bit—and to one side was her pastel cabinet on wheels.

### Take it Outside

Painting outdoors is easier than studio painting for her right now, given her living arrangements. "I'm going out painting this afternoon," she says. "It'll take awhile to set up the studio." When going on-location, she takes two of Jim Lynch's clean pastel palettes ([www.jimlynch.org](http://www.jimlynch.org)). "I have a small one for what I consider just enough pastels—about 300 colors—and I have a larger one when I need more. Sometimes 300 pastels aren't enough, so I carry both boxes to the field." She also uses an umbrella. "I have light-sensitive eyes, and even with the umbrella, the light is a problem. Landscape artists say you have only two hours to capture a scene before the light changes, but I personally have only one. Any longer than that and the light gets too blinding for me."

Because her painting outdoors time is short, Sandia often returns to the same spot the next day. "On the first day, there's a lot of excitement, but on the second day, all the fury of the first day is gone. In the calm, I can see different things, add to the painting or start all over again." She also takes photos, because "the camera may capture something I didn't notice." Also, if she's painting at a famous location, she wants to be sure to get key shapes, such as the profile of a mountain, correct. "I usually don't need them, but photos are a security blanket."

For the most part, the artist depends on her "internal radar" for finding beautiful combinations of shapes to paint. "The last thing I look for is color. All of us are



excited by color, but the colorful scene may not be paintable," she explains. "I'm an old layout person, so I know what shapes look interesting to me." She loves Santa Fe's adobe structures, but notes, "I'm not looking for subjects; I'm looking for shapes."

At Sycamore Creek  
(9x10)

Although she works both in the studio and outdoors, her *plein air* work is typically "material gathering" for the larger, studio pieces. One or more *plein air* studies may become references for a larger piece. "If I have one piece that turned out well, I'll try to be faithful to it." However, this can be quite a task given the difference in painting large. (A studio piece may be 32x40 inches while an on-location work is usually only 8x10.) "One stroke in a small piece may become six or eight strokes in a larger piece," she says. "Working bigger is not just about working larger but about editing, improving, embellishing, making decisions. Each painting has its own life and its own demands."

### A New Beginning

On the day of our interview, Sandia reports that she thinks she's found the right house. "Most houses are built for families, not artists. My new house will serve me for creature comforts, of course, but it'll also have a big enough space to paint in."

In accord with her beginnings in painting, this search for a new place began because of Sandia's faithfulness to her inner voice and to what Joseph Campbell described as pursuing one's bliss. "I lived off my savings for two years, so I could go from a viable architectural practice to becoming a full-time painter, and it was difficult. I kept saying to people, 'I'm not quite self-supporting. And so it was until I began to say, 'I am self-supporting. That's when it all changed.'"

For now, larger pieces will have to wait until Sandia buys a new house with space enough for a roomy studio—a place where she can set up her easel with plenty of room to step back to get a distant view of her work. She'll also need a place large enough to spread her paintings around. She likes to put paintings on cabinets, shelves—anywhere out of reach of the tails of her cats. "I like to have my work throughout the house, placed where the light will change. I want the normal lighting that most people have in their homes so I can see if my work will read correctly under that light." She also likes to place her *plein air* pieces around the house so she can mull over them.

New Mexico artist *Elizabeth Sandia* is a noted pastel painter of Southwest landscapes and a signature member of the Pastel Society of America. Her award-winning work has been featured in many shows, and she's represented by Canyon Road Fine Art in (Santa Fe, New Mexico), Piñon Fine Art (Denver) and Basalt Gallery (Basalt, Colorado). We checked back with Sandia before going to press, and she tells us she now owns a most wonderful home at the bottom of a mesa in Ojo Caliente.