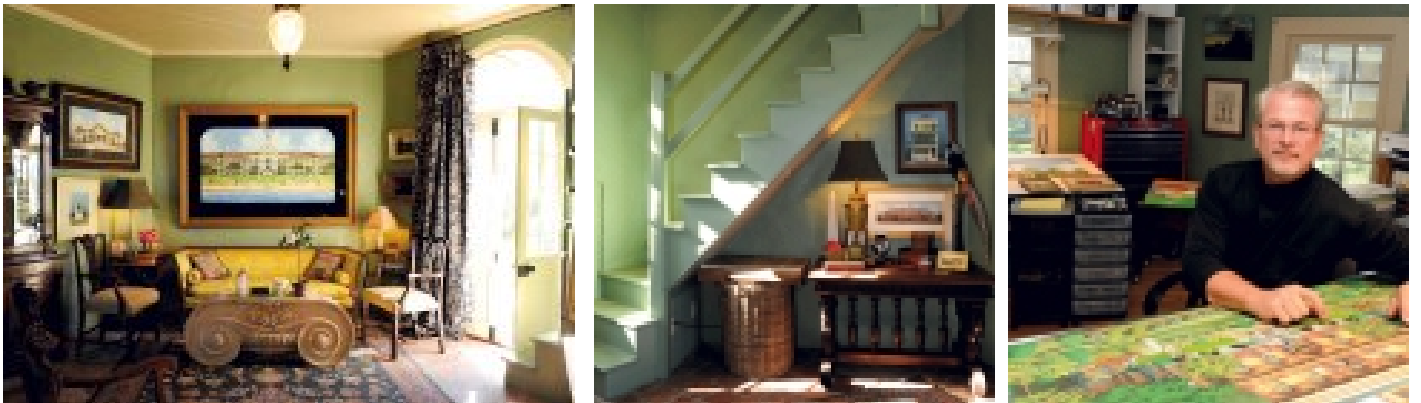


Jim Blanchard's pad

Life in a garçonnière

BONNIE WARREN



CHERYL GERBER PHOTOGRAPHS

Imagine an artist's studio perched in the top of an 1828 garçonnière. Here, surrounded by lush flowering gardens, ponds and fountains, you will find Jim Blanchard working as an artist, architect and designer while he enjoys the beauty of Houmas House Plantation and Gardens, located in Darrow, southwest of Sorrento, in Ascension Parish.

"The space is perfect for my studio," Blanchard says as he relaxes in the 16-foot-by-16-foot six-sided space. "As an artist, I work in solitude, and to be able to look up from my work and view the ever-changing life of the garden is inspiring. I'm an early-morning person, so I love to hear the birds singing and watch the light changing when I begin work. Each morning there's a different color scheme to enjoy."

Blanchard has lived in several places in New Orleans, always with a studio nearby, but the glory of having a garden perch at Houmas House is the most unique workspace he has ever had. "There is a rich history about the garçonnière," he says. "The pair of two-story buildings that flank the mansion were constructed to house the young men in the family. Originally the first floor was a living room with a bedroom on the second level."

Now one garçonnière, facing the house, is the Turtle Bar, where visitors to the plantation can stop and have a mint julep, and the one on the left is Blanchard's studio and home. Each building is connected to the mansion by 120-foot-long paths lined with blooming plants and various shades of green shrubbery.

At first glance, both appear to be as they originally were, but a closer look at Blanchard's studio and home reveals a 12-foot-by-60-foot addition jutting out into the garden. "I designed the addition so it would appear to be a garden wall," Blanchard says. "I didn't want it to destroy the character of garçonnière's architecture."

Inside Blanchard's secret hideaway, there is a light-filled living room on the first floor of the original garçonnière, with a shotgun-like configuration that has a library-dining room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. Blanchard even resisted having high ceilings inside the addition to keep it from having an overwhelming impact on the site. "The library-dining room has 7-foot-high ceilings while the other spaces are 8 feet high," he says. "We painted the new exterior walls green to blend with the outdoors and then had plants and flowers added along the garden walkway on one side of the expansive lawn and abutting the structure on the patio and Neptune Pond side."

Blanchard knew exactly which antiques he wanted to use in his new home. "I designed the spaces to fit my favorite antiques and art," he says. "Everything I used has special meaning to me. The couch in the living room belonged to my grandfather Dave Robichaux; the 1860 Renaissance cabinet in the library-dining room is also from my family. I acquired Jim Bowie's portrait, along with one of Bowie's mother and a third one of his brother Rezin, from a Bayou Lafourche estate.

"In the end, I was amazed that I had plenty of space. It isn't one bit cramped. Most of all, I love my studio. It feels like a cockpit of a helicopter — everything I need is right at my fingertips and the view sometimes gives me the impression that I'm flying at treetop level. Solitude, light, gardens, oak trees: It's a little bit of heaven."

