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## Drawing himself back

**Exhibit of Peter Sinclair's drawings at Friends of Historic Kingston**

From now through Dec. 19, Friends of Historic Kingston is showing the ink drawings of historic preservationist Peter Sinclair, a resident of West Hurley who founded and was the former president of the Society for the Preservation of Hudson Valley Vernacular Architecture (HVVA) in the late 1990s. Given Sinclair's seminal role as a preservationist, it's no surprise that his subject matter is the region's historic stone houses, Dutch barns, costumed colonial re-enactors, house interiors, and gatherings of musicians and Sinclair's preservationist friends (usually in rooms whose heavy ceiling beams reveal their historic provenance). What is perhaps unexpected is how the objects of his fascination have been transformed by the spontaneity and inventiveness of the artist's pen into lively forms full of whimsy and personality.

The assured grace of his line, the rhythm of his squiggles and hooks, and the partially shaded shapes, edged with white space, have the spare, syncopated melodiousness of a Thelonious Monk composition. His congregating figures have a bird-like character and variety, recalling the lyric masterfulness of a Saul Steinberg or Edward Gorey. In Sinclair's jazzy compositions, which jump, extend and retract across the page, the material and social culture of the regional historian's world is a swinging place; every stone, beam, and jug is sentient and alive. The dormers on his roofs swoop like chutes, the vibrating pattern of window panes set within the scribbled description of a stone wall is as rich and subtle as the intricate design in a carpet, and the slouching postures and exclaiming faces of his figures sing with insouciance. Some pieces veer toward the abstract: the vertical supports and planed roof in a barn are a scintillation of strokes, filling the page from top to bottom. Other pieces have a monumental simplicity: the depiction of a man with a shaded face sitting at a table set with dishes has the cryptic force of a Bonnard.

Such mastery provides no clue to the extraordinary circumstance of the works' making: Sinclair suffered a stroke in October 2006 and picked up his pen for the first time while undergoing rehabilitation at the Thompson House Rehab Center in Rhinebeck. Wheelchair bound, he was supplied with paper and pen by Bob Hedges, a fellow member of HVVA. His initial attempts were "real basic," according to Roberta Jeracka, an HVVA member and Sinclair's companion. It was only after he returned home months later that the drawings began to blossom and pour out of him. Jeracka sent him a postcard from Vermont and something clicked; since then, she and his other HVVA friends keep him well-supplied



Peter Sinclair



with photographs and postcards (the show includes a drawing inspired by Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* and also has pieces depicting hay barracks, which are based on photographs from the Netherlands).

### Providing a focus

Sinclair, who can only speak a few words but is now walking, draws every day after doing his exercises. "He's very particular," said Jeracka, who lives in Albany and works as an architectural historian assistant at Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc. "Many things have been ripped up. This focus gives him something to look forward to."

The drawings and the support he receives from HVVA members are a major force in his healing and recovery.

"It's part of his therapy that still works," said Rob Sweeney, the Town of Ulster historian and HVVA's treasurer and newsletter editor. "Other people have given up, but we're like, 'not necessarily.' He's able to connect with pen on paper and communicate his thought. In a sense, this is about the world of art therapy. There was no stimulus in the nursing home, and it was killing him. He gave so much, and now vernacular architecture is saving him."

Sinclair's pieces also herald his re-emergence as an artist after many years. Born in Milwaukee in 1930, Sinclair, whose father was noteworthy regional artist Gerrit Sinclair, studied art while in college and taught art for seven years at the University of Wisconsin. Shortly after his arrival in New York City in 1967, he gave it up and opened up a business making bases for sculptures. He settled in Ulster County in the early 1970s after buying a farm in the area and moving his workshop into his home (it's currently being run by a coworker). After meeting historian Alf Evers and reading the books of Henry Glassie, an expert on vernacular architecture and folk culture, Sinclair joined the Dutch Barn Preservation Society, ultimately forming a Hudson Valley

chapter with architectural historian John Stevens, which became HVVA. The two men worked together to begin cataloguing the Dutch buildings in the area, with Sinclair locating and identifying the buildings and Stevens documenting them. Today, the organization has more than 400 members. Sinclair also is a timber framer — he and Jeracka recently attended a timber framers' conference in Saratoga Springs — and he donated a portion of his collection of historic tools to the Ulster County Historical Society, which exhibits the artifacts in a room at its headquarters in the Bevier House.

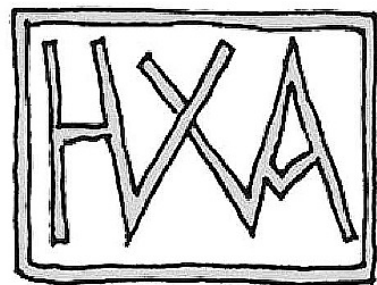
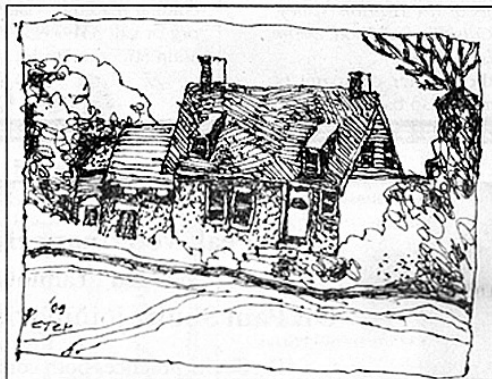
Thanks to help from HVVA members, Sinclair remains active in the preservationist movement. "He comes out with us on our field trips. We keep that part of his life going," said Sweeney. "We all realize the importance of what this man has done to preserve. There was no interest in Hudson Valley vernacular architecture before him. This is somebody who cares so much that even if he couldn't move, he'd find some way to communicate and share his enthusiasm."

It was Sweeney who came up with the idea for the exhibition at Friends of Historic Kingston, which consists of more than 100 works. He and fellow HVVA members Eddie Cattuzzo and Jim Decker organized, framed, and hung the works, which are priced at \$125 for a framed piece and \$75 unframed. All proceeds will benefit FOHK and HVVA.

The exhibition is open Saturdays through Dec. 19 from 1 to 4 p.m. and by appointment. There will be an artist's reception on Dec. 5 from 7 to 9 p.m. For more information, call (845) 339-0720 or visit [www.hvva.org](http://www.hvva.org).

"He has received services. It's all part of giving back to the preservation movement that he started," said Jeracka. "Peter is literally drawing his way back into the world he loves." ++

Lynn Woods



The Society for the Preservation of  
Hudson Valley  
Vernacular Architecture