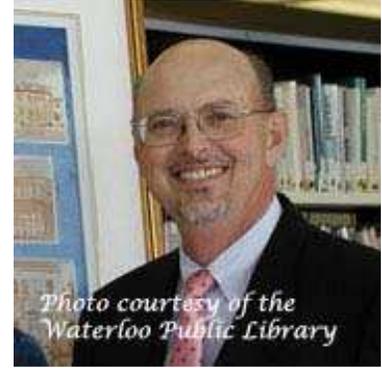


# Peter Etril Snyder

While many artists profess their hearts to be in New York City or Paris, Peter Etril Snyder has said, “My heart, she is in Hawksville.”

The successful Waterloo painter, who grew up in a Mennonite family, found success in business by painting what he knew – Waterloo County Mennonites.



“I paint what I know and love,” he has said. “I’ve always believed that people would buy what they perceived was honest work.”

Still, it was a radical career choice coming from the youngest of three boys born to a conservative family in 1944. “Mennonites,” he once wrote, “were not supposed to be artists.” His choice of subjects was equally risky, given that the Old Order Mennonite people who inspired his art were against the making of “graven images.”

His parents, however, indulged his dream. Snyder’s father, a horse-driver for Maple Lane Dairy, was convinced his son’s career choice was doomed to failure. His mother thought it a suitable hobby, not a career.

Many years later Snyder has become an internationally known artist, commissioned by both corporations and individuals. His paintings have been purchased by the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and by the Prime Minister’s Office, for presentation to H.R.H. Prince Philip. Together with his wife Marilyn and brother Doug he operates a gallery in Waterloo. His affinity for the simplicity of country living has earned him the moniker of Canada’s Norman Rockwell.

Snyder began painting at 12 and within a few years had decided that art was the only thing for him. He attended the Rockway Mennonite High School in Kitchener where there were no art classes. The year 1962 saw him enrolled in the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, where he studied for three years. In 1967 following a lengthy trip to Europe, he returned to Waterloo to make the startling discovery that “Mennonite Country” was a very unique place.

He was 23 years old at the time and as an aspiring artist had been painting “distant, and often dramatic and exotic” landscapes. At the encouragement of his new wife, Snyder began to paint what was in his heart – the rural scenes of Waterloo region.

As a Mennonite, Snyder learned a practical approach to life which has influenced his art. He describes it simply as the process of layering paint. “Carpenters, harness-makers or practical crafters of any kind hold great appeal for me. There is something so satisfying to start with raw materials and make something.”

His paintings often began with a camera. Over the years, friends have informed him of special events such as barn raisings, or the sapping of maple syrup. Snyder has built files containing thousands of sketches and photographs that inspire his painting. He recently donated 52,000 negatives taken over 40 years to the library at Conrad Grebel University College, to further knowledge about Mennonite life and culture. He often uses images from several different photographs to create a single work.

“I couldn’t fool those old Mennonite farmers even if I wanted to,” he admitted once. “They know exactly where everything came from. One will say, ‘that’s Ely’s horse and that’s Noah’s barn. Now what’s Ely’s horse doing at Noah’s place?’ ”

*Photo courtesy of Waterloo Public Library*