





Painter IN THE PADDOCK

Though best known for his racing scenes, Peter Williams has set up his easel around the world

By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by Mathea Kelley

Two generations of Keeneland race goers, Peter Williams is the painter in the paddock, the dapper gentleman in tweed who briskly wields brushes and turns oils into sycamore trees, jockey silks, flashy colts, and ardent racing fans.

But a recently published collection of his work paints a more complete portrait of the 79-year-old plein air artist. Although his work at Keeneland and other major racetracks has been key to Williams' success, he has also dashed around the globe, setting up his easel on five continents and painting almost anything that crossed his path, from bobbing boats and bucking broncos to beautiful nudes and bountiful gardens.

Those works are among 162 paintings showcased in *Peter Williams Retrospective: Paintings and People Dear to Me*. Publicist Fran Taylor, a friend of Williams, edited the coffee table book and her West High LLC published it.

"What is so nice about this is that people have had a chance to learn more about him and see that he has a greater depth of talent and experience," said Taylor. "I have had a number of people say, 'I thought he just painted Keeneland.'"

The scope of Williams' work was a surprise even to Taylor as she, Williams, and graphic designer Suzanne Dorman scrutinized slides of his paintings to choose those used in the book.

"I remember thinking, 'I had no idea he painted the Alamo. Where does it end?'" she said.

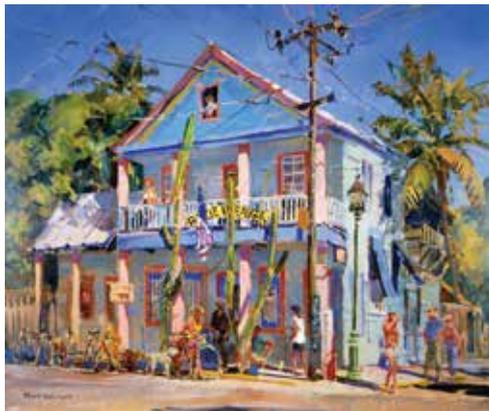
Work on the 171-page book began last summer, and it was published in time to be sold at a retrospective exhibition of Williams' works, held in the fall at the Hastings Community Art

Williams signed copies of his book at Keeneland during the spring race meet.



"When I am engrossed in something and enjoying it, it doesn't matter what the conditions are."

– Peter Williams



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From left, Williams shows his breadth in paintings such as *Sheikh Mohammed's Training Track, Dubai*, *Where Camels Have the Right-of-Way*; *Blue Heaven, Key West*; and *Ihungia Sheep Station, New Zealand*.

Centre in Hastings, New Zealand. Williams divides his time between his native New Zealand and Louisville, Ky., where he also has a home.

Serving as the unofficial artist in residence at Keeneland, Churchill Downs, Saratoga, Del Mar, and Monmouth Park for three decades has made Williams much better known in this country than in New Zealand, where, he laments, "I'm still a bit of a joke."

His highly visible and perennial presence in those paddocks also has made him one of art's most accessible ambassadors, the rare artist who doesn't mind a curious onlooker peering over his shoulder.

"I love it, honestly and truly," he said. "I relish their input. Oftentimes, you are too close to your own work."

That gentility, paired with a wit as quick as his paintbrush and an enthusiastic interest in others, has created a wide circle of friends for Williams. Many of those friendships are also spotlighted in his book, through some 50 small black-and-white snapshots, paired with some paintings. Most show friends, many well known in racing circles, pretending to paint at Williams' easel.

Pictured first is former Keeneland chairman and president James E. "Ted" Bassett III, among Williams' initial allies in the racing industry and "like a Dutch uncle to me," said Williams. Others include Thoroughbred owners Marylou Whitney and Will Farish; Queen Elizabeth, painted in the paddock by Williams during her visit to Keeneland in 1984; the late mystery writer Dick Francis, one of Williams' closest friends and owner of many of Williams' paintings; jockeys Patti Cooksey and Steve Cauthen; Keeneland

WILLIAMS' WIT

In addition to his talent as a painter, Peter Williams is an amusing raconteur. He shared a few stories with writer Vickie Mitchell.

A painting of the 1933 Kentucky Derby, the famed Fighting Finish, was one of several commissioned by Churchill Downs to mark the Derby's 125th anniversary. It's a piece that Williams, 79, could not have painted from life. He painted the scene from behind the two dueling horses, an angle that was not photographed. When people ask about the painting, he likes to tell them, "What you don't know is that I was on the No. 3 horse and that [the angle] was where I was when I hit the ground."

One busy Blue Grass Stakes day Williams placed a painting on the paddock wall to dry. His car was parked on the other side; he planned to walk out, lift it off the fence from the outside and put it in his car but as he walked out of the paddock to do so, "a guy disappeared into the clear blue yonder with my painting." Security was called; the painting was found hidden in some shrubs. Williams took the attempted theft as "a great compliment."

An artistic vein runs through the Williams family. Peter's three children have all done art in some fashion. One son is a former cartoonist; another son is an art director. His daughter also paints. When the family traveled the United States in a motor home in 1981, Williams and his then-teenage children painted the Amish, who "hate to be photographed, but love to be painted," he said.

His brother and sister are not artists, although in their youth "they were just as artistic as I was," Williams said. Farming became his brother's profession. "He is one of the leading breeders of Angus cattle in the world," Williams said. "Anything I could do in farming was abysmal next to my brother, so it gave me satisfaction to have achieved something in a different field."

Tasteful nude studies are scattered throughout the book. At book signings, Williams often sizes up his fans, jokingly judging them too young for those R-rated images. "Ah, this book is for mature audiences," he'll say. His wit also emerges with the book's final painting, a nude woman, back to the artist, gazing out a window, black cat by her side. "Nude and friend, a beautiful ending" the painting's description reads.

As accustomed as he is to painting things that move, bucking broncos proved a tough subject. He painted them only once, at the Calgary Stampede.

"I wasn't able to do it very long. They don't keep still," he said.



Of his paintings Williams says, "The best ones happen quickly, which I think applies to just about everything in life."

bugler Bucky Sallee; and the late Churchill Downs outrider Glen Webster. Among those beyond racing circles are actress Bo Derek, who has worked with Williams on fundraising projects; fellow artist and singer Tony Bennett; and former President George H. Bush.

The snapshots are accompanied by Williams' enthused comments. For Derek, "A Perfect 10!" of course. For jockey Tammy Fox, "unobtrusively setting standards in a man's world." For trainer Bill Mott, "If I should be reincarnated as a horse, please, God, may I be in his stable."

Every Painting Tells a Story

Williams has no need for a journal or a diary. Because he paints on location, every painting is a visual and visceral experience for him, and as he leafs through the book, paintings trigger stories of people and places.

An early still life memorializes one of Williams' favorite quick dinners, the standard Sunday night meal in New Zealand — a boiled egg, toast, and tea. Vintage cars, painted at Keeneland's Concours d'Elegance and other shows, reveal Williams' hobby, restoring Model T Fords. He has four restored to driving condition in New Zealand, including a shiny red one featured in the book.

Williams delights in telling others he's simply "an out-of-work sheepherder," a reference to his foray into farming. His painting *The Last Wimbledon Ewe Fair* pays homage to flocks of his former, woolly charges.

Then there are his travels, recorded in paintings of London's Big Ben, Gibraltar;

harbors in France and Maine; Key West's colorful cottages; the New York Stock Exchange; the camels of Dubai; and the peaks, beaches, country lanes, and quiet streams of New Zealand.

Paintings of fox hunting, polo, eventing, sailing, and even bull riding show that horse racing is not the only sport he paints.

Horse racing, though, dominates Williams' book, with Keeneland pictured most often. There's good reason, said Taylor. The racetrack's beauty, its fall and spring meets, both colorful times in Kentucky, and Williams' affection for the track make it a favorite subject.

Adversity as an Advantage

Painting on location poses challenges, but Williams won't whine about wind, rain, blowing sand, or bitter cold. "I have a big umbrella, and I just strap it to my easel and go on with it."

If anything, adversity is an advantage.

"It makes you hurry. They [paintings] are all difficult. The best ones happen quickly, which I think applies to just about everything in life."

He points to specific paintings to prove his point. Keeneland

in the snow; Keeneland in the rain, the painting chosen as the cover for the U.S. edition of his book; *The America's Cup*, painted from a boat on bumpy seas off the New Zealand coast near Auckland. "When I am engrossed in something and enjoying it, it doesn't matter what the conditions are."

Williams' method has defined him as much as his artistic style. In all his years of painting on location at racetracks, he has seen only two other artists doing the same.

Working in an unexpected way has made his career, he believes.

"That is the only reason for my success," he said. "I've always encouraged my children to be nonconformists; if you conform, you get treated like sheep."

Spoken like an out-of-work shepherd who broke free of the flock and found friends, fame, and fortune elsewhere. 🐑

For dates and locations of Williams' book signings and a list of stores where his book is available, visit peterwilliamsart.net. Williams will be signing his book at Saratoga Race Course this summer during the track's 150th anniversary.

