

Peterspladsen og Peter Jensen

Smith Peter or Denmark's Peter

At the motorway exit on E39, Hjørring North, turn right. About 400 meters after driving through Bjergby there is a new Bjergby sign. On the left side of the road across from the sign is "Peterspladsen" and the activity house Solhjem.



Peter's animals on Peterspladsen

"Peterspladsen" is the lawn in front of Solhjem and on the lawn is a small zoo consisting of many birds and animals including a lion, tiger, giraffe, elephant, kangaroo and a couple of penguins. The birds and animals stay in the same position all year round, because Peter Jensen, best known as Smith Peter or Denmark's Peter, has made them out of various pieces of scrap and cement.



A solid workhorse in front of Solhjem

On another lawn beside the mini-zoo, a powerful workhorse looks out at the surrounding scenery. Inside the activity house the walls are decorated with many drawings and paintings made by Peter.

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Peter as a young man and Peter as a mature gentleman

Thomas Peter Jensen, born in 1898 near Bjergby, was the sixth child out of thirteen. All the children survived at birth and that was remarkable at the time. The Jensen family were not among the most privileged and at a very young age, Peter was required, as many youngsters were, to work as a shepherd boy. Later he worked as a day labourer, farm worker, peat digger and as a skilled thatcher.

In his younger days, Peter was a good chess player and a keen soccer player. He was not exactly a precise kicker but he could kick the ball very high and very far. In fact, he once kicked a soccer ball so far, they never found it! His ability to kick earned him the name of Denmark's Peter. For many years, he was a faithful spectator at soccer games in Bjergby. While watching the games in the summer, Peter protected his head from the sun by a handkerchief with a knot in each corner. He sometimes found the games boring but this did not keep him from shouting good advice to the players: "Kick it up in the air, 'cause when the ball is in the air the opponents can't get to it!" Nothin' was like in the good ol' days!

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Peter's mother Else Marie Jensen

When Peter's father died, Peter managed the small farm for his mother. She later bought a house in Bjergby, where Peter and his brother Anton moved in with her. In 1934 Peter built his own house in Bjergby for the sum of Kr. 5,000 and his mother moved in with him. After Peter died, the house was sold and torn down and a new house was built on the original foundation at Skagen Landevej 78.

Peter fetched the thatched roofing for his house from a neighbour and brought it home on a wheelbarrow. He continued as a farm worker and peat digger and at some point became a mink breeder. It was a lucrative business and sometimes when he did not have enough mink cages, he used kitchen drawers and cupboards.



Peter and a guest in front of his house on Skagen Landevej

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Peters housekeeping was untraditional and not exactly according to modern or hygienic regulations. He bought discarded fish from Hirtshals, which he had delivered in a masons tub at his house. Peter picked choice pieces of fish for his own dinner and the rest he chopped for mink feed. An old petroleum engine, that that made a terrible racket, pulled the chopper.

With his particular Vendelbo (inhabitant of Vensyssel) mindset, sense of humour and ingenuity, Peter was a well-known figure, not only in Bjergby, but eventually, around Denmark. Many people stopped in front his house to look at all his animals and have a chat with Peter. If he found them compatible, he might invite them inside to have a look at his paintings and sometimes he would even allow them to buy one.

Peter was happily unaware of common painting techniques such as perspective and size ratio. He did not acquire his knowledge from an art academy or art courses. He observed, used his imagination and painted things as he himself saw them. A popular art critic, Broby Johansen, often visited Peter with a group of students from Vrå High School and this gave rise to the short film "Naivisten" (The Naive One) about Peter and his art.

Peter sold his paintings and charcoal drawings or gave them away according to his state of mind in the moment. He once sold a picture with a motif from Greenland but the paint was not quite dry, so Peter asked the customer to come back in a couple of weeks. In the meantime, Peter decided that the painting looked too bare and white, so when the customer came back the motif from Greenland had a row of evergreen trees!



An older version of Peter

Some of Peter's finest works are his charcoal drawings. From small pictures in a pamphlet celebrating the 50th anniversary of the local National Health Association, Peter drew the chairman and various members of the board. He drew the parish council chairman, and when the chief of police

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turned fifty, he made a drawing of him from a picture in the newspaper. However, the drawing of Peter's mother had the place of honour in his home. Peter was very devoted to his mother.

Beside his paintings and drawings, Peter eventually changed his garden into a small jungle. When he gave up breeding mink, he got a brilliant idea of how to use the old cages. He used them as skeletons for his animals along with parts of old tools and machines, cars, galvanized metal plates, scrap and junk, which there was an abundance of on his plot. Around this skeleton, and with the help of layers of cement and paint, an animal began to appear. Lieberkind's Animal Encyclopedia and a visit or two to the zoo in Aalborg was his inspiration. He needed scaffolding for the giraffe. With rope, screws, bolts, boards, board bolts, felled trees, etc., and a huge drill with two handles he assembled the scaffolding.



Peter's giraffe

Aside from his artistic activities, Smith Peter was a bit of an inventor. Best remembered is his sugar beet harvester from 1962, which according to his own words, consisted of scrap iron, an old car, a horse rake and some galvanized metal plates. It was an impressive piece of machinery, but unfortunately, also useless. His potato harvester suffered the same fate. It required a strong wind and, preferably, a hurricane before it could work. These inventions later became skeletons and filling for his animals.

Some of his quirky inventions actually worked but were hardly suitable for mass production. He installed a homemade shower in his own house by first filling a tub on the second floor with warm water. The water was led through a hose down to the little shower stall he had built in his back entrance, which was also his utility room. The sides of the stall consisted of three old doors and perhaps a forth that could be closed. This gave a limited amount of space for a large man like Peter to take a shower. There was no tile floor; the water simply seeped into the earth. This was probably a harmless solution with no risk of flooding, as a shower was hardly part of Peter's daily routine.

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The king of the animals in front of Solhjem

Seats from the old cars were recycled as living room furniture. He bought old clocks at auction sales, built them into boxes, and then called them grandfather clocks. At least one invention was a success. A discarded old car could pull a saw with the help of a belt and a stone placed on the car's speeder.

Peter and his family had many sorrows in life.

In 1912, Peter's sister, Kristine, hanged herself. She was 22 years old, unmarried but had a daughter. According to her mother, Kristine had for several years suffered from "moody spells", was quite melancholic and had threatened to commit suicide.

Another sister, Johanne Marie, also had a fragile mind, and after spending eight years in an institution, died of tuberculosis in 1918. She was 26 years old, unmarried and had no children.

In May of 1919, Peter's 57-year-old father, Martin Jensen, hanged himself. According to Peter's mother, he had felt fine the past couple of weeks and she could not understand why he should commit suicide. After Kristine's suicide, he had said that she must have been insane at the time. It is noted in the bailiff protocol, that Peter's mother had informed of insanity in her husband's family.

In 1922 Peter's brother, Niels, died after only one week in a mental hospital near Aarhus. He was declared insane but later an unbiased doctor studied the journal, and assessed that the confusion and symptoms indicated Niels had died of blood poisoning. He was 19 years old.

The rest of Peter's siblings were well functioning and became self-sufficient, each in their own way. Two of them immigrated to the United States. Peter and many of his siblings were unmarried and had no children.

Peter's mother died a natural death at the age of 83 in 1950 at the Old People's Home in Brønderslev.

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An okapi and camel in Bjergby

Diagonally across the road from Peter was an auto workshop where Erhardt Nielsen and his family lived. Peter frequently crossed the road to have a chat with Erhardt and the customers. He was generous with good advice and freely voiced his opinion about everything and everyone. Occasionally, Peter would become offended about something and preferred to stay on his own side of the road until he became tired of his self-imposed isolation. When he started whistling while walking back and forth along the road and finally to sit down on a stone in front of his house, it was his way of signaling that he was ready to forgive Erhardt for whatever imagined offense he had committed. Erhardt waved him over and things were once again back to normal. For some unknown reason he called Erhardt "Filitikus".

Finn and Keld's Memories

Erhard's two sons, Finn and Keld, grew up with Peter as their neighbour, and from an early age had the opportunity of studying his comings and goings and his outlook on life. They had ringside seats so to speak. The following is a selection from their observations:

Every morning Peter set a big clay bowl out to the side of the road, so the milkman could fill it with fresh milk. As mentioned, Peter's housekeeping was not exactly top-notch and the trucker's dog from down the road often saw an opportunity to lick the bowl clean before the milkman came. Peter fetched the filled bowl and drank with great pleasure from it on his way back to the house.

One of Peter's favourite dishes was porridge, one type normally made from butter, flour and milk, but which he made out of lemon soda. Another favourite was red porridge normally made from berry juice, but which Peter made out of raspberry soda.

One day Peter was walking along the road enjoying quite a large chocolate bar. He met a neighbour and asked him if he would like a piece of chocolate. Indeed he would. "Well, then go over to the grocery store and buy some!" was Peter's response.

However, Peter was far from cheap and he used to visit a family that could afford only the bare necessities in life for themselves and their many children. He would bring a big bag of Danish pastry from the baker and loved to watch the kids stuff themselves.

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At one point he got central heating but he did not want hidden pipes, so they were laid on the floor by the wall and in front of the inside doorsteps where you had to lift your feet anyway.

One day Peter came over to Erhardt with a painting and wanted Erhardt's honest opinion. Erhardt mentioned that it might be a mistake that the rabbit in the background and the cow in the foreground were more or less the same size. "You can see if you can do it better!" retorted Peter. So much for Erhardt's honest opinion.

If, however, he was in the mood Peter accepted Erhardt's advice. One day he was ready to take the bus to Brønderslev, and had time to pay Erhardt a little visit before the bus came. Erhardt advised him to change his clothes; he was not dressed fit to go anywhere. Peter took it nicely and trudged across the road to change his clothes – or perhaps to put another layer over what he was already wearing. He was into layer upon layer before it became fashionable. Back to get Erhardt's approval, Peter asked, "Is the gentleman's attire suitable now?"

When Erhardt and Peter had a dispute, Peter would exclaim, "The little devil wants war!" (Erhardt was quite a small man)

If his trousers became too small, Peter would sew a wedge down the back without regard to colour or kind of material he chose. It might be checkered, flowered or a clashing colour. In the summer, his footwear consisted of a pair boots he had cut the shafts off.

After many hours of driving lessons and two failed tests, Peter succeeded in getting his driver's license. The first driving instructor was not happy about the way he heaved and shoved the gear-shift. "A new gearbox is EXPENSIVE!" he complained. Peter decided to try a new instructor and the chemistry between them was better. He finally got his driver's license.

Peter's first car was a Hillman with the steering wheel in the right side of the car. When he had to drive into his own driveway, he would park on the right side of the road, get out of the car, take a good look in both directions, and if the coast was clear, he would get back into the car and drive full speed ahead into his driveway. It was more or less the same procedure going out of his driveway. First, he had to make sure no cars were coming, get into the car again and finally back onto the road. Almost every time the car scraped the outside water tap. Although, the car was protected by a thick layer of paraffin oil, Peter often had to ask Erhardt for a bit of black paint to repair the damage.

At railway crossings, he would get out of the car to make sure no train was on the way.

Peter's last car was an Anglia, which had seen better days, but Peter himself thought it was in good condition. One day the police stopped him and the officer discovered a hole under the floor matt. "What's that?" he asked Peter. "As far as I can see, it's Skagen Road", was Peter's reply. That was the end of Peter's driving. Hereafter, the car was used to pull the saw.

One time Peter was asked if he had taken out life insurance. He answered that he already had insurance. When asked where he was insured, he pointed towards the heavens.

Peter had quite a few sayings. When something went wrong (for others), he would say, "All cats get torn skin!"

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If something went too slow, it was “Let lonni take tonni.” (Which no one knows what means!)

About laziness: “You don’t catch any rabbits with a dog you have to carry to the hunt!” or “Nothing jumps into a sleeping wolf’s mouth!”

His opinion about the world in general: “Everyone want to be the lord but no one wants to carry the sword!” With that particular saying, he would often walk off.

After Peter passed away, his many animals were moved to the lawn in front of the old people’s home, Solhjem, in Bjergby. Through the years, they have been maintained and are frequently visited. The old people’s home was closed and stood vacant for quite a few years. It has since been renovated, and is now an activity house and, as the name implies, houses many activities, the main one being a Bed and Breakfast. The house and garden are well worth a visit, either to look at all the animals on the lawn or to study Peter’s paintings and drawings on the walls inside.

Although Peter’s art is not world famous there are a few pearls to be found. Especially his big picture, “Da bønder gjorde til hove” is a fantastic detailed painting that can truly be described as a work of art. There are many free events at Solhjem throughout the year where you will find more information about Peter.

Smith Peter did not make much fuss about himself or his art but through the years, his works have been mentioned in newspapers and magazines. Little did he imagine the interest he would be subject to after his death. One of his sayings was: “A prophet is seldom loved in his own country!”

Peter died in 1985. He was christened Thomas Peter Jensen, but his surnames have been changed around on his gravestone.

More information as well as pictures and the film “Naivisten” can be found on the internet at “Peterspladsen.dk”. In the historical archive at Bjergby school there is yet another film about Peter.



The elephant has an impressive view of the countryside

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Peter was buried in Hjørring. The stone was moved to Solhjem after the time period paid. The grave was expired and then moved.



Article based on stories told by the brothers
Preben og Børge Lind Thomsen (back) together
with Finn Nielsen, Britta Jensen and Keld Nielsen (front)