



Taubman Museum, Roanoke; gift of Martha Daura

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PIERRE DAURA: LOCAL TREASURE

By Lynn Lowry Leech

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AS YOU DRIVE ON Route 39 through the hamlet of Rockbridge Baths, about 15 miles north of Lexington, perhaps you've wondered about the tall, tan-painted cinderblock wall flanked by wooden structures with angled tin roofs that parallels the road for 40 or 50 feet. Behind the wall you can glimpse the top half of a two-story, Spartan-looking house, also cinderblock, painted tan with burgundy trim. Shrubs and other plantings soften the side entrance to the property, but there is no

clue as to the fascinating history of this structure that looks so out of place amid the frame country houses surrounding it. The wall shelters the view from curious gawkers of the famous warm springs, or "baths," for which the village is named.

As a child in the 1960s, I came to know the couple who were then owners of the baths and the tall, severe house that overlooked the pool. I knew them as Louise

Lynn Lowry Leech grew up on a farm near Rockbridge Baths. She attended Lexington schools and graduated from Randolph-Macon Woman's College. Her early career was spent in academic administration, followed by a post as managing editor of *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee University Review*. After retiring as executive director of Rockbridge Area Habitat for Humanity, she now spends her time doing as she pleases.

Above: *Golden Fiields and House Mountains, Rockbridge Baths, 1951–71.*



The Daura home in Rockbridge Baths

Lynn Lowry Leech

and Pierre and enjoyed frequent visits to them with my parents.

Louise was gentle and sweet and spoke with a soft, precise and refined accent that was hard to place: there were traces of upper-crust Richmond inflections, somehow tempered by the influence of a foreign language. She wore her salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a low knot at the base of her neck. Her eyes were soft and brown and drooped a bit at the outer edge, making her look wistful and almost sad. I remember her telling me she regularly swam in the concrete-enclosed, warm springs pool directly in front of the glass doors of their house. You could see bubbles spiraling up from the bottom, and she told me she sometimes swam on Christmas Day because the water was so warm.

Pierre had a wicked, crooked grin and smiled with his eyes as well as his mouth. His white hair was fluffy and unruly, and I particularly remember his gnarled hands.



Pierre Daura, 1960s

Once, when he was showing me an elongated wooden sculpture, he told me the smooth, satiny finish had been achieved by his repeatedly rubbing it with his hands to impart the natural oils from his skin to the wood. In the winter, he dressed in layers of old-fashioned but good

quality woolen clothes — pants, shirt, vest, jacket — as do many Europeans who do not have the benefit of central heating. He spoke with a strong accent which I now know to be Spanish/French, and he and Louise always seemed to take genuine pleasure in our visits.

Pierra was born Pedro Francisco Daura y Garcia on the island of Minorca, Spain, a few days before his parents returned to their home in Barcelona, where

they registered his birth date as February 21, 1896. His mother, Rosa de Lima Garcia y Martinez, died when he was seven. His father, Juan Daura y Sendra, a classical percussionist at the Barcelona Liceo Orchestra, operated a small textile business to supplement his modest musician's salary. Pierre and his two younger siblings, Ricardo and Mercedes, were raised by their father, who never remarried.



Pierre, about age 4

Daura's godfather, the cellist Pablo Casals, and Italian painter Pietro Rosario Cavallini exposed the boy to the arts at an early age. Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, a region of strong identity and fierce pride, provided a fertile ground of artistic influence on the young Pierre. "Art fever like a great fog hung all the time over Barcelona," Daura later wrote.¹ He recalled "museums, concerts, opera, theatre" and 25 or 30 art galleries.

His artistic abilities were evident as early as the age of four. Although his father tried to dissuade his interest in art, he eventually gave in to Pierre's insistence and allowed him to devote himself to his art. Daura received formal art education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Barcelona, La Llotja, where his teachers included Jose Calvo and Jose Ruiz Blasco, the father of Pablo Picasso. While studying at La Llotja, he also worked for a designer of theatrical sets to help support his family.

At age 14, he and two young friends established a studio, *Estudi Vert* (Green Studio), and he sold his first painting in November 1911 to a Catalan collector who said it reminded him of the work of Paul Cezanne.

EARLY 20TH-CENTURY Paris was the world center for artistic activity and major movements in modern painting. Among the Catalan artists who emigrated to Paris at this time were

All paintings are by Pierre Daura.

1 William M. S. Rasmussen, *The Beauty of the Land: Pierre Daura's Vision of Virginia*, Virginia Historical Society (Richmond, 2006), p. 7.

Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Salvador Dali. Daura, encouraged by Casals, his godfather, followed them in 1914, when he was 18. He arrived early in the summer and first worked in the studio of painter and art theorist Émile Bernard, with whom he remained friends for many years. He later studied engraving under André Lambert and learned woodcut engraving from a fellow Catalan, Louis Jou.



Bruges, 1926

In Paris Daura was exposed to the work of three giants of French painting, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cezanne, and during a stay in Toledo, Spain, he became familiar with El Greco's expressionist style. Back in Paris, he took inspiration from Amadeo Modigliani's original style while working to develop further his skills as a painter and printmaker.

During World War I Daura was unable to serve because he was a minor and was assigned instead to work in a Renault munitions factory. After the war, he returned to Paris, taking up residence and resuming his painting career in Montmartre, the artist enclave in Paris's 18th arrondissement, and traveling around Spain, France and Belgium.

In 1923, while Daura was working on a mural for a hotel in Cherbourg, the scaffolding collapsed, and his injuries kept him hospitalized for several months. Afterward, his left hand was permanently clenched.



Louise in Red Beret, c. 1927

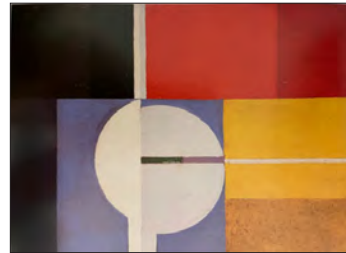
LOUISE HERON BLAIR was one of eleven children of a Confederate veteran and prosperous Richmond businessman,

Lewis Harvie Blair, and Martha Ruffin Field, his second wife, who was half his age. Lewis Blair's collection of Greek and Chinese porcelain steered at least one of his daughters toward art.

After graduation from Bryn Mawr in 1927, Louise went on an extended trip to Europe to study art in Italy and France. Arriving in Paris in late 1927, she was introduced to Daura, and they became engaged in February 1928. And in that year Daura was given his first solo show in Paris, where his work was praised for "sincerity" and "distinction."

Louise and Pierre were married in December 1928. In Paris, the Dauras' social circle included artists, writers, musicians, gallery owners and critics. In 1929, Pierre took Louise to his Catalan homeland to meet his family. His exposure to French ideas on art and the influence of Cubist painters, particularly Picasso, had made

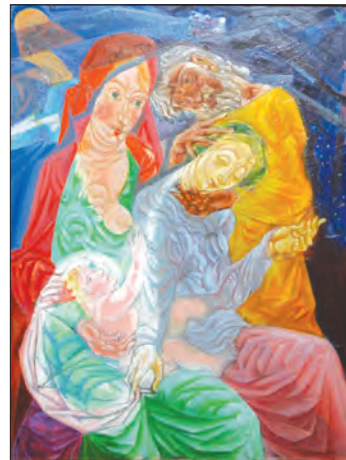
Centre Pompidou, gift of Martha Daura



Martha Daura collection



Daura Gallery, University of Lynchburg



Chrysler Museum (Norfolk), gift of Martha Daura



Clockwise, from top left
Untitled, 1929

Love of the Three Oranges, 1939-60

Baseball, 1939-55

The Good Family, 1955



Lot River in Autumn, St.-Cirq-Lapopie, 1930-36

him a very different artist from the one who had left 15 years earlier. Yet his paintings in Catalonia did not push elements into abstraction, as the Cubists did, but emphasized geometry. In short, while his early work was influenced by his contemporaries in Paris, he developed his own style that combined romantic realism, expressionism and abstraction.

The Dauras decided to leave Paris for a quieter life in the country and settled in the medieval French village of St.-Cirq-Lapopie, near Cahors, which Pierre had visited in 1914. He was enamored of its terra cotta-roofed houses clustered around the towering church on a cliff overlooking the Lot River. One of the oldest houses in the

village—built in the 13th century—was for sale, and the Dauras purchased it and, after making repairs, moved there in the summer of 1930.

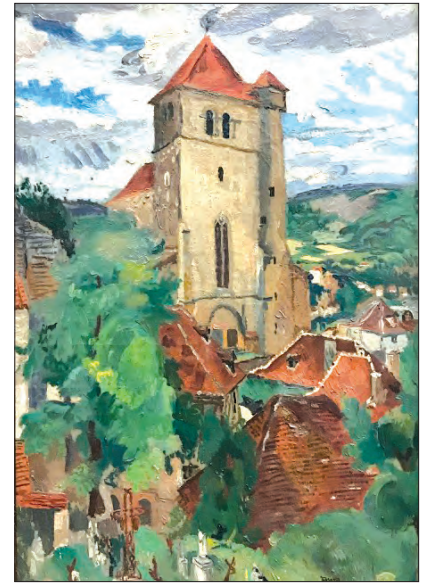
Their daughter and only child, Martha, was born there that same year, and the family lived in



Louise and Martha, c. 1933

St.-Cirq-Lapopie for nearly a decade.

Louise fell in love with the village. She wrote in a letter to her family that she found an “enchanted, medieval atmosphere, without a modern note to break the charm.” “The drama that passes daily among these 200 inhabitants is more exciting and poignant than in all the movies and plays of the big city.”²



View of St.-Cirq-Lapopie, c. 1927

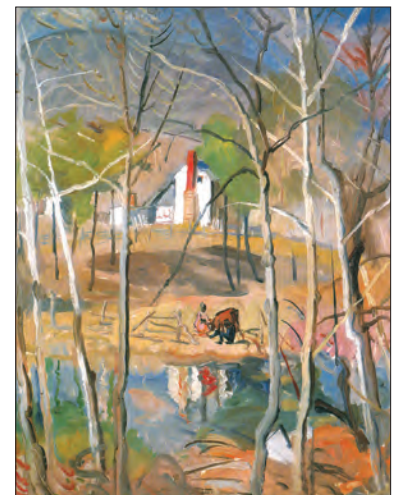
Private collection



View of St.-Cirq-Lapopie, c. 1930-34

paintings and engravings, and he frequently painted the village church.

DAURA MADE his first trip to the U.S. in 1934-35 to visit Louise’s relatives. As a wedding present, her mother had given the couple property that included an old ice house, a cabin and the warm springs in Rockbridge Baths, and the young family stayed



Milking, Rockbridge Baths, c. 1935

Martha Daura collection

² Rasmussen, p. 7.

there for a year. During that time Daura painted many western Virginia landscapes, which were exhibited in 1935 in Barcelona.

In 1937, a year after the Spanish Civil War broke out, Daura, then 41 and an ardent Republican, volunteered to fight against Franco's forces. Because of his age, his much-younger fellow militiamen called him Grandpa. Daura was passionate about his country and glad to do his duty, but found it hard to be away from home and family. After the war, he refused to return to Spain, and as a result, the Franco government revoked his and Martha's Spanish citizenship. He never again lived in his homeland.

In 1939, the Dauras again traveled to the United States, and after World War II broke out, they established permanent residence in Virginia. Pierre and Martha became naturalized U.S. citizens in 1943. The family settled into their cottage at the Baths and lived there from 1939

University of Georgia



Martha, Pierre and Louise at Tuckaway, 1946

to 1942. In 1942 they became the caretakers at the historic Rockbridge property Tuckaway for Colonel Albert Tucker, who had been recalled into active duty, and they lived there until 1945.

THE ROLLING landscapes of Virginia provided new inspiration for Pierre.

After the war, the Dauras returned to St. Cirq, where their home had survived the war. The family continued to vacation there in summers — and sometimes for even longer — but they never again lived there full time.

Georgia Museum of Art



St. Petersburg Museum of Fine Arts



Clockwise from top left
Big Barn at Tuckaway, 1942–45
Lilacs and House Mountain, 1942–45
House Mountain, 1943–45
Yellow Trees by Maury River, 1939–50

Georgia Museum of Art

Martha Daiura collection

In the summer of 1945, the Dauras moved to Lynchburg, so Daura could earn more money to send Martha to college. They settled in an apartment and

San Antonio Museum of Art



Good Henry, 1947

Daura became an art teacher. From 1945-46, he chaired the art department at Lynchburg College and gave private lessons.

From 1946 to 1953, he taught art at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, now Randolph College. There Daura often painted portraits of other college employees. Some of these

portraits caused controversy because the college administration disapproved of his using Black people as models in the class (for instance, *Good Henry*).

During the war the future modern artist Cy Twombly (1928–2011), who lived in Lexington, came to Daura for lessons. Twombly later recalled that it wasn't so much Daura's lessons and critiques from which he benefited; hearing Daura talk about art opened a whole world of modern painting.

DAURA'S first solo show in the U.S. took place at the Lynchburg Art Gallery, opening on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day. Again a war cast a shadow over his life.

Howard Hammsley, via Daura Archives



Exhibition opening, 1941

Religious themes also appeared frequently in Daura's work. By the late forties, his topics included the Crucifixion, Pietas, the Holy Family and most important to him, mother figures. Daura saw the mother, who gives of her life to create another, as the ultimate symbol of creation and existence.

Martha Daura collection (both)



Above: *Adolescence*, paper pulp, 1945–53

Left, *Mother and Child*, holly, 1959

He combined his teaching with exhibitions, exhibiting landscapes and sculptures, a new form he began to explore in the 1950s. He sculpted in wood, stone, metal and even tried paper pulp.

The Virginia landscape impressed Daura as “grandiose as nothing I have ever known.” His landscape paintings depict simple rural tasks like burning brush and plowing, houses, barns, chicken coops and livestock, moods of the changing seasons and the country scenes. These motifs were what he saw every day, and he painted them repeatedly. Daura saw his landscape paintings as “an important contribution to help people discover the beauty of their land . . . to inspire men with a love for their native soil. . . .” He painted hundreds of landscapes, some in oils but more in watercolor or tempera, which



Virginia Historical Society

Red Barns and Jump Mountain, 1945–55

Immediately below: *Shed and Hogback Mountain*, mid-20th century
 Bottom: *Farm by the River*, Rockbridge Baths, 1941



Virginia Historical Society (both)

he preferred for plein air painting because the materials were less cumbersome.

He wrote that his time in Rockbridge County “produced the impression of a very wild, nearly savage country. . . . Yet in some places, when I came to forget that I was in America, in Virginia, I couldn’t help but think of some places in France, in St. Cirq, some places in Catalonia, Montsegur, the Pyrenees.”³ He once said: “Through images, [the artist] delivers clearly and incisively a rich content of thought to the viewer . . . images that should open the eyes and through the mind, reach the heart.”

His reflective character is evident in his pensive, sensitive studies of people. One of my favorites of his

³ Rasmussen, p. 13.

Georgia Museum of Art



Virginia Historical Society



Left: *Woman with Chicken*, c.1939–55

Right: *Janitor with Red Broom*, c. 1951

portraits is *Martha at Thirteen*, painted in 1943–44, when the family was living at Tuckaway. Martha recalls she didn’t want to sit for this portrait, but her mother bribed her to do so by promising to read *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott to her. (Apparently Martha wanted to spend all her time reading, so Pierre and Louise had to put a time limit on the amount of time she was allowed to read.) Another favorite is a portrait of Martha in her graduation dress.



Georgia Museum of Art

Martha at Thirteen, c. 1943

Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University / Kevin Montague



Martha in Graduation Dress, 1946

DAURA painted 135 self-portraits (he was, after all, a readily available model) in various techniques. These portraits beautifully document his aging face from young adulthood, through the Spanish Civil War, into old age.

Private collection



Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona



Museu Diocesà de Menorca, Ciutadella



Virginia Historical Society



Clockwise from directly above:
Self-portrait, c. 1920
Self-Portrait in Militia Uniform, c. 1938
Self-portrait as a Painter, 1940
Daura in Beige Shirt, 1950-53
Self-portrait, 1960-69
Daura with Cane and Brushes, 1970-71

IN 1959 the couple built a contemporary home and studio on the site of the warm springs in Rockbridge Baths. Daura continued to exhibit in the region: at Washington and Lee, Staunton Fine Arts Center, the Lynchburg Fine Arts Center and, in 1967, at Virginia Military Institute, where his works were shown with those of another local painter, Marion Junkin.

Ten years after they moved to their home in the Baths, Hurricane Camille caused the creek that ran past the Daura home to flood, damaging art that had been organized in piles on the floor in preparation for being taken to three galleries for shows. Cabinets of his letters and other documents were also destroyed. Neighbors woke the couple as the flooding began and helped to



Taubman Museum, Roanoke



Martha Daura collection

move some of his art upstairs to safety. But a lifetime of work — oils, woodcarvings, and a collection of more than 200 watercolors dating from 1939 — was ruined.

PIERRE AND LOUISE shared a deep and enduring love. In a letter to Pierre from their Rockbridge Baths home in 1953, Louise wrote:

*Precious Pierre,
 I have just come in from a moonlight stroll in the garden and I thought how full my life has been of beauty, how rich with loveliness. Everywhere we have lived you have created beauty for me.*

They lived in Rockbridge Baths for the rest of their lives. Louise died November 10, 1972, and Pierre died on New Year's Day, 1976. Both are buried at the Bethesda Presbyterian Church cemetery in Rockbridge Baths.

Before the Spanish Civil War, Daura had ambitiously pursued an artistic career and he was at the forefront of the artistic avant garde in



Daura at home in Rockbridge Baths, 1960s

Barcelona and Paris. After the war, he became a teacher, helping people to understand art. And in the last two decades of his life, he created art for his own satisfaction and pleasure, fulfilled commissions and sold works to support his family. He did not sell through commercial galleries after leaving Europe in 1939, choosing to sell from his home or at exhibitions at academic venues and local arts clubs. At one of his first shows in this area, at Washington and



The Dauras at a local exhibition opening



Mountaineers

in the 1930s he had painted their farm, about six miles from the Daura home, and Daura gave them a watercolor of it (opposite).

PIERRE DAURA was arguably the greatest artist active in Virginia in the 20th century. But although his works were shown in more than a hundred group and solo exhibitions during his lifetime and he sold extensively, he never achieved widespread fame. In his daughter Martha's opinion, traumatic experiences in the Spanish Civil War, followed by the tragedies of World War II, changed his outlook. Fame ceased to be important.

Later in his life, Pierre said, "All I have ever wanted to do is find a way to paint. I have painted. I have worked. I have given myself to my art. That is what I have wanted since my very early age . . . to be an artist . . . that is what I am."



Lowry Farm, Rockbridge Baths

POSTSCRIPT

DAUGHTER Martha Randolph Daura has rescued her father's reputation from obscurity by cataloging his vast body of work after his death and, with her late husband, Tom Mapp, has promoted the rediscovery of her parents' work through gifts to more than 30 museums and public spaces in Europe and the United States. This includes a large collection of paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures and archival material from both Pierre and Louise to establish the Daura Center at the Georgia Museum of Art, the largest repository of Daura art. Locally, the University of Lynchburg's Daura Museum holds many works from Martha's collection. The Taubman Museum in Roanoke has held several exhibits of his work and shows selections from Daura paintings it owns in a small permanent gallery.

In recent years, greater attention has been paid to Louise and her work. A show in 2023–24 at the Georgia Museum of Art entitled *Power Couple: Pierre and Louise Daura in Paris* featured portraits by Louise and engravings by Pierre. Louise's alma mater, Bryn Mawr College,

Lexington News-Gazette

Lynn Lowry Leach

Lynn Lowry Leach

now houses the Louise Heron Blair Daura collection of letters, including a series she wrote to her family in 1938 while Pierre was a Spanish Republican soldier. A self-portrait by Louisa Blair Daura is part of the National Portrait Gallery's 2024–25 touring exhibition *Brilliant Exiles: American Women in Paris 1900-1939*.

In 2002, Martha donated the Daura home in St.-Cirq-Lapopie to the French Région Midi-Pyrénées. It is now an artists' colony, "Les Mansions Daura," and

in 2018 the French Ministry of Culture made Martha Daura a chevalier, or knight, of l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (the Order of Arts and Letters).

To my mind, the Dauras are unheralded local treasures of Rockbridge County. They lived a quiet, unassuming life, taking pleasure in friends and the details of daily life. Their pride in and love for their daughter Martha was always evident, as was her devotion to both of them. We are all richer for having had them in our midst. ■



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