



Martha Daura, by Louise Blair Daura, 1960. See page 4.

ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 54



SUMMER 2025

LOUISE BLAIR DAURA: ROCKBRIDGE DAYS

By Robert Keefe

LOUISE HERON BLAIR was born into a wealthy Richmond family on January 15, 1905, the youngest of four daughters of Lewis Harvie Blair, a canny and successful businessman with progressive social opinions he shared as widely as he could, and his second wife, Martha Ruffin Field.

Louise had a proper upbringing for that time and her position, and was graduated from Richmond's posh St. Catherine's School in 1923. She enrolled in Bryn Mawr College in suburban Philadelphia, where she perhaps stood out from the typical



Portrait of Louise Heron Blair, 1910, by Ellen Graham Anderson (1885–1970). The artist, who lived in Lexington, and her subject were first cousins.

GMOA, 2009.348; photo by Nelda Damiano

debutante-student. For example, Louise and a friend puckishly founded a “mutual examination insurance company” that offered to indemnify fellow students against poor grades. She also published a pamphlet describing social life at the college as a caste system based on seniority (written strictly tongue in cheek, Bryn Mawr insists today).

On graduating cum laude in 1927, Louise went to Europe, as well-situated young women frequently did, to study art in Austria and France. In Paris, she met a Spanish-born artist, Pierre Daura, and they were



Louise Blair at Bryn Mawr College in her senior yearbook photo, 1923

married on December 20, 1928. (Martha Daura, their daughter, stresses that they were not student and teacher, as is commonly reported.) Befitting their youthfulness and the milieu, the Dauras embarked on an energetic social and professional life, which involved them closely with other artists, writers, musicians, gallery owners and critics.

Among the Dauras' friends in Paris was a Uruguayan artist, Joaquín Torres-García, and the Daura and Torres families even shared an apartment complex in bohemian Montmartre. Louise painted several portraits of the Torres-García daughters, Olimpia and Ifigenia, and

Pierre created engravings of them.

After two years in Paris, however, Pierre and Martha moved to a tiny, medieval village in southwestern

A mock exam insurance policy underwritten by Louise Blair's mock company at Bryn Mawr

France, Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, where they had spent part of their honeymoon. There they bought and restored a house, built in 1236, and painted numerous frescoes inside.

Martha, their only child, was born there on September 24, 1930.

THE FAMILY lived mostly in Saint-Cirq for nearly ten years, but in 1934 they traveled to the United States, where Pierre met his wife's Virginia family for the first time. Some years earlier, Louise's family had purchased the remnants of the Rockbridge Baths Hotel, an old resort in Rockbridge County, 130 miles west of Richmond.



Olimpia Torres with Inca Gold, by Louise Daura, 1929



Untitled (Baby Martha), by Louise Heron Blair [Daura], 1930

Louise's widowed mother had given her two of the resort buildings as a wedding gift — an icehouse and a log cabin — and the young Dauras stayed there for about 15 months. Pierre was enchanted by the Rockbridge countryside and painted a series of canvases, which he exhibited in Barcelona in 1935. Louise, meanwhile, mainly reared their toddler daughter.

Not long after their return to Saint-Cirq, a failed military coup ignited the Spanish Civil War, and Pierre, although he was 41 years old, returned to his native country to fight against the forces of Franco. He created a number of searing etchings, sculptures and paintings of his fellow soldiers.

While he was away, Louise wrote frequent letters from Saint-Cirq to her family in Richmond, describing her loneliness and giving second-hand reports of Pierre's battlefront activity, until he returned in the autumn of 1937, having been severely wounded. (Some of her letters were published in *The Atlantic* in 1938, and in one, she said she would call herself an anti-Fascist but not a Republican because that term would make her "feel allied with the G.O.P.!")

In 1939, two events cemented the Dauras' future: When Franco's forces emerged victorious in Spain, Pierre's Spanish citizenship was revoked, along with that of his wife; and Louise became seriously ill. The family returned to Rockbridge Baths in Virginia, where Louise received treatment and recovered. By then, however, World War II had begun, and an early return to Europe was impractical. Louise was a native Virginian

and Pierre loved the area he had discovered in middle age. They were grateful for Rockbridge Baths.

IN EUROPE, even with a new daughter, Louise Daura had continued to create art at least occasionally — mostly portraits, a few paintings of the village of Saint-Cirq, some sketches of Martha. But in America, she surrendered her art almost completely to full-time domestic life.

Scholars, among others of us, are left frustrated. "I regret that Louise Heron Blain Daura did not pursue her art career with a determination . . . I feel a personal disappointment over what Louise has left us," wrote Jann Haynes Gilmore, a board member of American Women Artists, in 2024.

"When she painted she was so deeply engrossed that she forgot about time, family, house," Martha Daura explained in 2025. "When she married Pierre and had me, she felt she had made a commitment that she had to honor."

No other event or circumstance explains the change. But does there have to be a better reason? Can anyone explain what happens after marriage, a child, a war that injures a spouse, relocation to another hemisphere?

LOUISE DAURA settled quickly and by all accounts happily into the rhythms of Rockbridge County. Within a year or so, she had been the



Blonde Martha, about age 5, by Pierre Daura

Barn at Hays Creek, by Louise Daura, 1939–42





Across the Maury, by Louise Daura, date unknown

ological Society of America. Naturally, she was invited to join the Ignorance Club, populated by the area's most accomplished women.

She taught at Effinger High School. She told fortunes at a Bundles for America bazaar in 1942 that raised money for overseas soldiers. In 1946 she became a lecturer in art history at Lynchburg

College, now the University of Lynchburg, where her husband taught studio art; that appointment, which lasted three years, seems to have sparked no major or even minor body of new art, although she painted sometimes. She brought up Martha. And she baked!

host of countless meetings and demonstrations in their Rockbridge Baths home; she belonged to two garden clubs, Blue Ridge and Glasgow, and gave talks on French gardens. Ancient caves as well as modern flowers fascinated her, so she joined la Société Préhistorique française and the Archae-



Louise and Martha Daura in a joint passport photo, 1947; a page from a booklet Louise made for Martha's birthday in 1960 (as she did every year)

"You've destroyed an artist, to be a cook
They say to me with accusing look,
"Leave pots and pans, get out and paint
"Put down on canvas landscapes quaint!"

"Do portraits of your favorite friends,
For wasted talents, make amends!
Paint figures, still lifes, illustrate,
A few pastels, before too late!"

Instead I ply the lowly art
of cookery with all my heart
My palette is a chopping board
My cleaver sharp as any sword.

My paints are vegetables and fruit
My harmonies are more than cute
Tastier than apples by Cezanne
Are the pies I lift out from the pan.

Go on and rave about Matisse,
In whipping cream, I find my peace,
For variety you take Picasso
I know more ways with the tomato.

For self expression, how 'bout Paul Klee?
I toss a salad — and that ain't hay
The women of Renoir are plump and rosy
But tea by the fire is just as cozy.

The modern artists the world perturbs,
But see what I can do with herbs!

If I painted scenes that no one bought
In tons of paintings I'd be caught
Where in the world those pictures store
And every year still more and more?

With cooking, see just what I mean!
The family licks the platter clean!
And every day I start anew,
To make some dainties for them to chew.

What painting ever gave such joy
As cookies to the hungry boy?

The only time for paints I yearn
Is when I let the pastry burn.

Louise Blair Daura
Untitled poem

THOUGH ROCKBRIDGE BATHS was their center, the Dauras spent summers in Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, where Pierre and Louise still owned the historic home they had renovated as newlyweds. Louise and Martha spent hours there spelunking and photographing and studying prehistoric cave drawings.

In Rockbridge Baths the Dauras made friends easily and were generous to them and to the community. Today, fifty-four years after Louise's death and fifty years after Pierre's, their neighbors, friends and acquaintances, or now the children, tell stories about them and show



Daura at Easel with Louise, by Pierre Daura, ca. 1960–69.

paintings (and a few of Pierre's sculptures) given as gifts or bought for a song at charitable events.

Louise loved having visitors in the house in Rockbridge Baths that she and Pierre had built to replace the old houses of the family's early years there, especially

friends from France. "Using an open fireplace and what one would here consider primitive equipment," according to our local newspaper, "she prepared the most exotic dishes for her guests."

On the evening of November 10, 1972, a Friday, Louise Blair Daura died, having endured another long illness. She was buried two days later in the Bethesda Presbyterian Church cemetery in Rockbridge Baths, half a mile from her home.

HER TOMBSTONE has no epitaph, but consider the poem reprinted above. It could not be more obvious that Louise wrote this in Rockbridge, in response to the same question we ask today.

"You've destroyed an artist, to be a cook' / They say to me with accusing look," she begins. Her friends tell her: "Leave pots and pans, get out and paint / Put down on canvas landscapes quaint!"

You can see her looking around her kitchen, thinking back on the painters she knew or knew about in Europe, Cézanne and Renoir, Picasso and Matisse, and Paul Klee, and she asks, perhaps not rhetorically: "What painting ever gave such joy / As cookies to the hungry boy?"

GIMDA, 2013.210

Both images from the Daura Study Center, Georgia Museum of Art

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gratitude first of all to Martha Daura for encouragement, information and insight, and for being such an engaging and energetic correspondent.

Thanks to Nelda Damiano and Katherine Rose Rabogliatti at the Daura Collection and Study Center, University of Georgia, Athens, and to Brooke Marcy, curator of the Daura Museum of Art at the University of Lynchburg.

And to:

Brilliant Exiles: American Women in Paris, 1930–1939. Yale University Press for the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian Institution, 2024.

Power Couple: Pierre and Louise Daura in Paris. “In Dialogue” publication; Georgia Museum of Art, 2023.

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Occasional news items in the *Lexington Gazette*, *Rockbridge County News* and *Lexington News-Gazette*, 1940–72.

Robert Keefe is the editor of *Rockbridge Epilogues*.

Images credited to GMOA are all courtesy of the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia (with Georgia object number); gift of Martha Randolph Daura.

This article is a companion to the major essay “[Pierre Daura: Local Treasure](#),” by Lynn Lowry Leech, published earlier in this journal.

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