



House & Home [+ Add to myFT](#)

House museums #90: Dora Maar

The painter, photographer and poet was given the house by her lover, Picasso, when he left her. Today, it is an artists' residency where Maar's radical spirit can still be felt



The house and garden sits on a hilltop in Provence © Brice Toul

- X
- f
- in
- Save

Louisa Treger YESTERDAY | 1

Stay informed with free updates

Simply sign up to the House & Home myFT Digest -- delivered directly to your inbox.

 [Sign up](#)

Ménerbes sits on a narrow ridge of a hilltop above the Luberon Valley in Provence. Nostradamus, writing in the 16th century, described it as “a ship in an ocean of vineyards”, and it feels as if little has changed since then: beige stone facades, a miniature citadel and the mistral still sweeping through the steep, narrow streets. Dora Maar's imposing, green-shuttered house seems to float over the top of the village, looking out across the valley to the Monts de Vaucluse.

Maar (1907–97) is probably most famous for being Picasso's “Weeping Woman”, his muse and his lover; yet her identity extends far beyond. A gifted photographer, painter and poet, she was also a committed leftwing activist. During the 1930s, her provocative photomontages became celebrated icons of Surrealism, and were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at the London International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936. Her work is radical and fantastical, imbuing the everyday with an uncanny atmosphere that is disturbing and mesmerising.



Dora Maar in the doorway of her home, which was damp-ridden and inhabited by scorpions when she moved in © James Lord

Her house was previously owned by General-Baron Robert (1772–1831), a native of Ménerbes who received numerous honours during the Napoleonic wars in Spain. In 1944, Picasso traded it for a painting and gave it to Maar as a parting gift, freeing himself to pursue a relationship with the artist Françoise Gilot. By this time, the house had fallen into disrepair and was damp-ridden, prone to collapsing ceilings and inhabited by scorpions. Maar renovated it, but discovered that the maintenance was a nightmare. When it rained, water ran into the stairway, and the steps grew a coating of moss; every year the walls had to be repainted and the plumbing repaired. But Maar was resilient, preferring the untamed beauty of Provence over the more polished vistas of the Riviera. She spent every summer in Ménerbes until almost the end of her life.

“**She famously said, ‘After Picasso, there can only be God.’ Following their break-up, she led an increasingly solitary existence in Ménerbes**

After Maar's death, an American arts patron, Nancy Brown Negley, bought and renovated the house to create a residency for writers, academics and artists. I was invited to visit by Gwen Strauss, the director, and fell in love with the spacious, high-ceilinged rooms, kept cool by stone floors. Some of Maar's landscape paintings still hang on the walls — wild, lonely and sumptuous. But the foundation has totally refurbished the interior, and little remains of her time there. The house brims with the creative energies of the artists-in-residence whose paintings decorate the walls alongside Maar's. I wondered what she would have thought of the modern comforts: the bright curtains and rugs, deep sofas and high-speed internet.

Maar's studio © Brice Toul

It wasn't until I entered her sun-drenched, second-floor bedroom, now transformed into an artist's studio, that her spirit came alive. I looked out at the view that she woke up to every morning — the jasmine and box hedges in her garden, the vineyards below and, in the distance, the crest of the Luberon mountains fading into a bluish haze. Suddenly, I could picture her in this room, entranced by the landscape. I could see her sketching it again and again, brow furrowed in concentration. Even after nights of insomnia or torment, she would pick up her rosary first thing and pray, looking to the horizon, which for her was the boundary where God and the earth met.

Recommended

The world's best house museums

She once said, “After Picasso, there can only be God.” Following their break-up, she led an increasingly solitary existence in Ménerbes, finding solace in religion and painting. Locals saw her speeding through the vineyards on her moped, an easel strapped to the back, and later, her hunched figure walking to the Notre-Dame-des-Grâces chapel below her house. Here, at last, she found a place of peace.

maisondoramaar.org

‘The Paris Muse’ by Louisa Treger is published by Bloomsbury

Find out about our latest stories first — follow [@ft_houseandhome](#) on Instagram

Copyright © The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved. [Reuse this content](#) [Comments](#)

Explore the series

READ MORE The world's best house museums

House museums #88: Claude Monet, Giverny

Currently reading:

- House museums #90: Dora Maar
- House museums #88: Claude Monet, Giverny
- House museums #87: Wilhelmina and Walther von Hallwyl, Stockholm
- House museums #86: Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Long Island
- House museums #85: Marjorie Merriweather Post's Hillwood Estate in Washington, DC
- House museums #84: Joan Miró
- House museums #83: Edward Hopper

[See all 90 stories](#)

Comments