DM house library credit Dora Maar Cultural Center.

Maison Dora Maar:
Exile and Summer for Artistic Creation

The house where Dora Maar once lived, the place where she took refuge and was left alone with every form of her art, is now a cultural center that combines artist residencies with exhibitions, conferences, and events aimed at both local and international audiences. To learn more about it, we spoke with its Director, the writer Gwen Strauss.

By Pilar Gómez Rodríguez

Photography courtesy of the Maison Dora Maar

Most of us know her for her photography and for her tumultuous relationship with Picasso, but Dora Maar—born Henriette Theodora Markovitch (1907–1997)—was also an extraordinary painter who also wrote poetry. Much of her pictorial and literary work was created in a very special place: a magnificent 18th-century single-family home that had once belonged to General Baron Robert (1772–1831), a native of Ménerbes, who received numerous honors during the Napoleonic Wars in Spain. In 1944, the house came into the possession of Dora Maar, who spent long periods there in silence, retreat, and creativity; a setting that seemed to invite exactly that. Located in Provence, the town of Ménerbes is one of "the most beautiful villages in France." It forms part of the Luberon Regional Park, a protected area of wildlife and game that encompasses the mountains of the range bearing the same name. Dora Maar immortalized the landscape in conceptual paintings where sky and earth clashed (and united) through intense zones of color. In the verses she also wrote, she expressed:

[...]
In this room where I have known madness fear and grief
It is the simple awakening of a summer day
Exile is vast but it is summer, silence in full
Sunlight an enclave of peace where the soul invents only
Happiness a child on the way back home

These verses are a reflection of the profound experiences she lived in a house that served as an exile from noise, from the past, from herself, and also as a refuge where hope could still find a place. There she spent her summers, arriving faithfully each year, proof that life went on; and that she, too, could and should continue bringing new artistic forms to light, in the company of her brushes and her verses.

And she spent many summers there. She died in 1997, but after her passing, the American patron Nancy Brown Negley wanted to make sure that the light of creation would not fade, nor Dora Maar's spirit be lost. She bought the house, restored it, and created an artist residency program—soon entrusted to Gwen Strauss—so that writers and artists could find their own retreat, their own kind of exile, until their moment arrived; until they could give shape to their projects. That house in Ménerbes, now transformed into the Maison Dora Maar, became a place where the summer of creativity would never end.

Strauss emphasizes this: this is a place where artists are free to make mistakes, and that's exactly what happens when you're exploring new paths in freedom. The goal isn't productivity or output at all costs; what matters is the journey. That's why, at Maison Dora Maar, they especially value artists who are at a mid-point in their careers, those with meaningful projects underway who can use their stay to shape and complete their work.

We spoke with Gwen Strauss about Dora Maar's legacy and spirit, about the role of patron Nancy Brown Negley, and about her own connection to the house. She's the perfect person to do so: since the residency program's founding in 2007, she has led the institution—first as Assistant Director, and later as Director.

Is it a priority for your institution to keep Dora Maar's legacy and spirit alive? If so, how do you achieve that? Do you, for instance, have any of her works or personal belongings on display?
We consider Dora Maar's legacy to be very important. She came to this house every year, from 1945 to 1996, to work in complete solitude on all aspects of her art; painting, photography, and poetry alike. That spirit of calm productivity still permeates the Dora Maar Cultural Center to this day. Artists who come for residencies often mention it after spending just a few days in the house. In a way, the residency program itself continues her legacy of creative freedom, while also providing a generative space that has long attracted artists.

The Maison Dora Maar has a small collection of her paintings and photographs on display. And of course, in our visitor center, La Mob, we also exhibit Dora Maar's *mobylette*. The public can book guided tours of the house and garden.

Above: Dora's studio as she left it, © Brice Toul.

Below: Dora Maar house salon. Credit Ruth Ribeaucourt.

What made the patron Nancy Brown Negley fall in love with this house and decide to buy it, restore it, and create an artist residency here?
Nancy Negley fell in love with the Maison Dora Maar because she could see it directly from her own home, the Hôtel Tingry, another historic mansion adjacent to Dora Maar's house. She would look out over the garden and was drawn to the idea of creating an artist residency similar to the Villa Medici, since she had spent quite a bit of time at the American Academy in Rome. After Dora Maar's death in 1997, she bought the house with the goal of establishing a creative refuge for artists, writers, and scholars in Provence.

What is the relationship between the Hôtel de Tingry and the Maison Dora Maar?
When Nancy Negley passed away, she donated her own home, the Hôtel Tingry, to the residency program. It was a natural evolution. The Dora Maar Cultural Center was, at once, both her project and her legacy. The Hôtel Tingry now serves as a space for exhibitions and events, and we also invite collaborating artists to take part in short-term residencies there.

What qualities must a potential project have in order to be selected? Could you describe some particularly valuable or meaningful projects or outcomes for your institution?
We select candidates through an application process submitted online. Applicants are chosen both for the merit of their project and the stage of their career. We support mid-career artists, writers, and scholars, and in the application we look for evidence that they are doing significant work in their respective fields. It's a highly competitive process, and we receive applications from people all over the world.

Above: *Baba Rice*, 2023
Muslin, polyester, silk, chiffon, inkjet print, and color pencil on fabric, 45.5 x 33.5 in.
Hangama Amiri

Below: *Man with Vase of Tulips*, (and detail below), 2024
Muslin, cotton, chiffon, velvet, polyester, silk, suede, and linen, 62.5 x 53.5 in.
Hangama Amiri
Photos by Daniele Molajoli

Not all of the residents are directly connected to Dora Maar, though sometimes they are. We've hosted important curators, such as Amanda Maddox, one of the lead curators of the traveling Dora Maar exhibition shown at the Getty Museum, the Centre Pompidou, and Tate Modern (2019–2020). Personally, I've felt great pride reading novels and other texts that I knew were started or completed during residencies—like Kathleen Winter's poetry collection or Nicholas Boggs's recent biography of James Baldwin. A French-Turkish couple, Çağla Zencirci and Guillaume Giovanetti, worked here in 2017 on their film *Sibel*, which later became a major success. We were able to screen the finished film and practically the entire village came to watch.

On a more personal level, how did you first become involved with this center? What has it meant for your career?
I met Nancy when I was director of the nearby campus of the Savannah College of Art and Design. She asked me to help her launch the program, and I've now been working on it for almost twenty years—it has truly shaped my life. I feel very fortunate to have met so many fascinating artists, writers, poets, and composers, amongst many others. It has been an enriching and rewarding experience. I also love being able to tell someone that they are going to have the opportunity to spend time here on a residency. I'm a writer myself, the author, most recently, of two works of historical nonfiction about women during World War II, *The Nine* and *Milena and Margarete*, and I believe that being a writer helps me better understand the importance of residencies for contemplation and creativity. From the beginning, I've said that this is a place where artists and writers are free to make mistakes. Here, they can experiment and grow in their practice. We don't focus on productivity or performance, but on freedom and exploration.

Is the relationship with the local community important to the Maison? What do you think it contributes to the environment, the town, or its neighbors?
Absolutely. The local community is vital to us. Our monthly *salons*, in which resident artists present their work to the public, remain very popular. The discussions at these events are always stimulating. We also organize concerts, exhibitions, performances, and workshops—the list goes on. We take our responsibility to engage with the community very seriously. The residents themselves are also active in village life and interact with locals in cafés, restaurants, markets, and at community events.

What projects or activities do you have planned for the near future?
We plan to further strengthen our exhibition program by inviting both French and international artists to show their work and engage in dialogue with the historic spaces. We're always seeking a balance between the local and the global. For example, in the summer and fall of 2025, we presented an exhibition on the Russian artist Georges de Pogédaieff—who lived in Ménerbes—at the La Mob exhibition space. At the Hôtel Tingry, we invited Afghan-Canadian artist Hangama Amiri to hold her first exhibition in France, where she presented powerful textile pieces exploring themes of exile, memory, and belonging. We also co-organized the first edition of the Dora Maar Film Festival in Ménerbes, featuring documentaries focused on street photography—once again echoing Dora Maar's creative legacy.

And for spring 2026, we're pleased to be presenting the work of French artist Françoise Sémiramoth at La Mob. Originally from Guadeloupe, she lives and works in Marseille and is a former Dora Maar residency fellow. In the summer, the Hôtel Tingry exhibition will feature the work of American painter Joanna Pousette-Dart, daughter of Richard Pousette-Dart, one of the founding members of the New York School. This will be her first exhibition in France, and she is creating a new series of paintings for the occasion, where she explores chromatic abstraction and light, designed specifically for this space. •

Above: Portrait Gwen Strauss.
Right: Dora Maar in doorway. Photo: James Lord.