

## ***Pierre Daura gets new Historic Marker in Rockbridge Baths***

~Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society  
for Lexington News-Gazette (July 1, 2020)

Rockbridge Baths has just been tagged again ... by local and international history.

And soon, it will boast a new historic sign on Route 39.

On June 25, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources announced the approval of [15 new state historical markers](#): the familiar white highway-side signs that, according to DHR, “educate and inform the public about a person, place, or event of regional, state, or national importance.”

These markers canvas a [diverse range of Virginia histories](#). Among the people, institutions, and communities most recently recognized: two Tidewater villages where watermen and boatbuilders thrived in the oyster trade; a range of early educational institutions including a mission school founded for students in isolated hollows of the Blue Ridge Mountains; the nation’s first volunteer rescue squad; the Civil War graffiti in Rockingham County’s Melrose Caverns; Barbara Rose Johns (who led the 1951 walk-out at Farmville’s segregated Moton High School, leading to the only student-led court case consolidated into the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision); and a now-vanished mill village in Southwest Virginia. Earlier this month, the state’s Board of Historic Resources also approved 20 additional markers related to [Virginia’s African American histories](#), announced by Governor Ralph Northam in recognition of Juneteenth.

This new local marker recognizes internationally acclaimed painter and sculptor, [Pierre Daura](#). Born in Barcelona in 1896, Daura would move to Paris to become part of its thriving inter-war, modernist art scene in the 1920s-30s. In Paris, he met and married another painter, Richmond native Louise Blair. During the Spanish Civil War, Daura fought for the Republican cause, against General Francisco Franco. Wounded during and exiled by Franco’s fascist government after the war, Pierre and Louise moved to the Baths in 1939: taking advantage of its healthier air, proximity to her family, and political freedom.

Daura was deeply attracted by the natural beauty and energy of Rockbridge’s mountains and valleys, establishing a studio at their farm near the Maury River (sadly, when [Hurricane Camille swept the area in 1969](#), he lost 200 watercolors, paintings, and statues to the flooding).



***Pierre Daura in his Rockbridge Baths Studio, 1960s (W&L Collections)***

He wrote that his time in Rockbridge “*produced the impression of a very wild, nearly savage country, grandiose like nothing I had ever known, like nothing I had ever seen. 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.*”



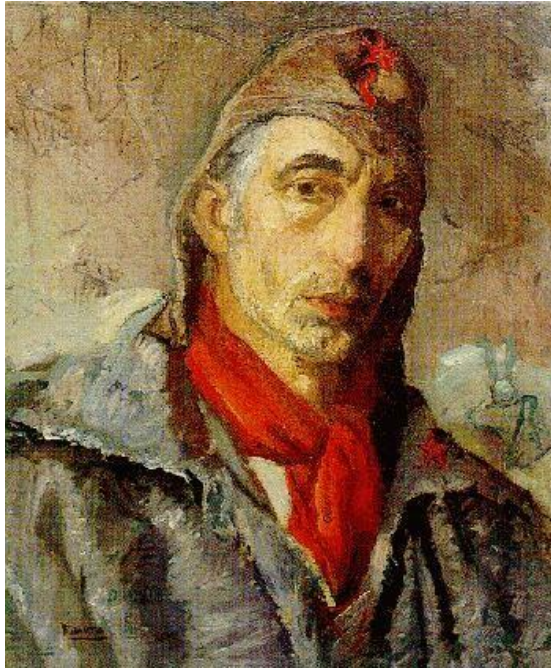
***Jump Mountain, Shack [Rockbridge Baths], 1939-1950***  
Oil on beaverboard. Virginia Historical Society

In the four decades he and Louise split between here and southwestern-France before his death in 1976, he would become a noted art teacher for a number of Virginia universities and artists, including a [young Cy Twombly, in Lexington](#). Rockbridge’s rural terrain, and the personal and professional ties he cultivated here, would color and shape his work, which he continued to [exhibit locally at Washington & Lee](#) and VMI, across Virginia, and internationally as well. In 1974, the [Daura Gallery](#) would be established at Lynchburg College, where he’d taught for a number of years.

In 2013-14, the Rockbridge Historical Society produced a 3-part series on 20<sup>th</sup> century Rockbridge Artists, featuring a talk by Barbara Rothermel (Daura Gallery Director, Lynchburg University); a related program focused on painter [Jean Helion](#) (French Modernist, and Daura’s brother-in-law, who also lived in the area for a time); and capped by photographer [Sally Mann](#), who extended the local and international chain of artistic legacies, by discussing how Twombly, taught locally by Daura himself, helped shape her own vision and craft.

A number of Pierre Daura’s colorful canvases hang proudly, personally in local homes, and can be publicly seen in university buildings, including W&L’s Lenfest Center for the Arts. He’s perhaps most known in these parts for his vibrant, locally recognizable landscapes: lush mountain ranges footed by sweeping grained and grassy fields: punctuated by anchoring red barns, or ramshackling sheds that the run of history has caught up with.

But Daura was also a committed and underrated portraitist. Rothermel noted his daily habit of beginning with some sort of self-portrait: not simply a means to ‘warming up,’ technically, but a means to ‘beginning to see your way into the world.’ Among them, see his 1939 self-portrait, after his service in the Spanish Civil War, re-presenting himself as an earnest soldier in this swiftly-brushed, traditionally red-capped populist cause [this canvas also appears in the photo of Daura’s Rockbridge studio, bottom left].



***Self Portrait as Loyalist Soldier, Spanish Civil War, 1939***  
**Oil on Canvas (Daura Gallery, Lynchburg University)**

A less commonly seen portrait, but one instantly and internationally recognizable, now hangs in the Rockbridge Historical Society Museum. Donated by Daura's daughter Martha in 2001, this oil sketch was painted in 1936 (the Dauras had first visited Virginia in 1934, setting up a vacation home in Rockbridge Baths, but not yet permanently moved to the area). The canvas looks more highly realistic than most of his more abstract paintings. Daura's fluid lines and subtle shadings show how controlled and refined his technique could be, even as his curved, dynamic brushstrokes anticipate the energetic sweeps that color his Virginia landscapes, and other portraits of family and friends.



**Pierre Daura, *George Washington*, 1936**  
**Oil Sketch based on Gilbert Stuart's "Athenaeum Portrait" (1796)**  
**(RHS Museum, donated by artist's daughter, Martha)**

It's interesting to imagine what Daura might have seen in this face, this cultural figure: in local, international, and artistic contexts. A political leader who, like Daura, fought in his own revolutionary cause, against autocracy? A community nod to the local Lexington college that would later champion his paintings and exhibitions? A chance to measure himself against a noted artistic standard, influence, or stylistic tradition, in ways that artists ever traffic between imitation and innovation?

The model, here, is [Gilbert Stuart's "Athenaeum Portrait:"](#) that iconic image of the nation's first president, now at the National Portrait Gallery, engraved onto the one-dollar bill, even serially copied by Stuart himself. Daura's 're-vision' of this monumental image of Washington now and newly holds another local tie. It's uncanny, actually, in its joint echo and anticipation: looking 240 years back, or 83 ahead, depending on how you script your histories.

Stuart's portrait was painted in 1796, during the last year of Washington's Presidency, and the same year his foundational financial gift would lead Lexington's Liberty Hall Academy to re-name itself as Washington College. In 2019, Washington & Lee heralded the arrival of an original "Athenaeum" bust-portrait by Stuart, now fronting Lee Chapel, picturing the Virginian statesman in his civilian twilight. This addition arrived though an [inventive exchange between W&L and Mount Vernon](#), who received, in reciprocal loan, the university's unique portrait of Washington as a uniformed British Army Officer: the only image of him that predates the American Revolution.

The chance to lens two works of art – or two perspectives on history – always brings new comparative insights and curiosities, choices and challenges.

Across Rockbridge, Lexington, and Buena Vista, a diverse range of histories, memorial forms, art galleries – and these growing signs and historic markers – offer inviting opportunities for new comparisons, and opportune encounter. Share with others, and with RHS, what you see.

Installation dates have not yet been announced for Pierre Daura's highway marker in Rockbridge Baths. In the meantime, to view & compare the two Washington portraits, contact Lee Chapel at [540.458.8768](tel:540.458.8768) and [RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org](mailto:RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org).