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Lydia Csato Gasman, Picasso Scholar, Dies at 84

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Lydia Csato Gasman, an art historian known for her groundbreaking scholarship on the work of Picasso, died on Jan. 15 in Charlottesville, Va. She was 84 and lived in Charlottesville.



The University of New Mexico Art Museum  
Lydia Csato Gasman

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Her death was confirmed by Larry Goedde, chairman of the McIntire Department of Art at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where she taught for two decades.

Fluent in several languages and equipped with a formidable memory, Dr. Gasman redefined Picasso studies. Most scholars had either analyzed Picasso's art purely in terms of formal innovations and aesthetic progress or offered one-dimensional readings of his work in relation to his life story. Dr. Gasman found a middle way.

One of her more sensational achievements was to track down Marie-Thérèse Walter, the great love of Picasso's life, in the south of France in 1972 and, over a period of several days, to conduct the frankest, most detailed interview about their life together.

But Dr. Gasman's most far-reaching accomplishment was to tie the imagery of Picasso's paintings to the life of his mind: his reading (especially the poetry of the Surrealists), his writings and notebook jottings, his psychic state and interest in all forms of mysticism, magic and ritual.

She introduced her findings in the sprawling four-volume dissertation for her Ph.D., which she earned from Columbia University in 1981. "Mystery, Magic, and Love in Picasso, 1925-1938: Picasso and the Surrealist Poets" delved into arcana like Picasso's interest in the Masons and their use of ritual objects; the sexual significance of the beach cabana, a frequent motif in his paintings of the 1930s; and his belief in the magical nature of the art and artifacts of so-called primitive cultures, especially African. It devoted 75 pages alone to the images of severed rams' heads in Picasso's painting and the underlying theme of sacrifice.

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available for purchase, was required reading in some art history departments and was regularly mined by other scholars and writers on Picasso, who all too frequently failed to credit her discoveries. John Richardson, Picasso's principal biographer, has said that Dr. Gasman did "more to unlock the secrets of the artist's imagination than anyone else." Luanne McKinnon, a former graduate student of Dr. Gasman's at the University of Virginia and now director of the [University of New Mexico](#) Art Museum, said, "Lydia's in-depth reading of Picasso is in the air and water of the field, so to speak."

Lydia Csato was born on May 28, 1925, in Focsani, Romania, to a prosperous, cultured family. She received degrees from the University of Bucharest in 1948 and the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest in 1953 and went on to become an award-winning Social Realist painter in Romania before escaping to the West in 1961. She first went to Israel, joining family members who had migrated years earlier, and then to Paris. There, seeing modernist art in depth for the first time, she became enthralled with Picasso's work.

In 1963 she married Daniel Gasman, a historian of science, and they soon moved to New York. They divorced in 2000, but remained close. She is survived by her brother, Joash Tsiddon of Tel Aviv, a former member of the Knesset.

Dr. Gasman was a strong, charismatic personality whom publishers often found difficult to work with despite their interest in her work. Her last book, "War and the Cosmos in Picasso's Texts, 1936-1940," was published in 2007 by the print-on-demand company iUniverse.

Dr. Gasman, who continued to paint, taught art history at [Vassar College](#) from 1968 to 1973 and at the University of Haifa in Israel from 1973 to 1975. From 1981 until her retirement in 2001, she was on the faculty of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where her impassioned lectures often drew standing-room-only audiences. Her classroom attire might include fishnet stockings, turbans and a leopard skin skirt. And, always, she smoked a cigarette.

Dr. Gasman contributed to the catalogs of several Picasso exhibitions, including "Picasso and the War Years: 1937 to 1945," at the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in 1999.

Her essay "Death Falling From the Sky: Picasso's Wartime Texts" focuses on the notebooks Picasso kept during his 11-month stay in Royan on the coast of France after Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939. It parses the visceral characterizations of air raids in his notebooks; traces specific word choices — he referred to bombs as partridges — back through his life, and through culture in general; and notes his use in collages of newspaper articles about the war. The result is a heightened sense of the connection among Picasso's often feverish writing, the convoluted forms of his paintings and his agitated brushwork.

In Royan, Dr. Gasman concluded, "there are moments when Picasso distinctly conceived writing as a substitute for painting and painting as a form of writing."

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