

## Obituary

# Dorothy Iannone obituary

**Artist whose prevailing subject was intense love in all its forms, from romantic to erotic and spiritual**



Portrait of Dorothy Iannone taken in Kyoto in 1962 by her then husband, James Upham. Photograph: courtesy Air De Paris and Peres Projects, Berlin Seoul & Milan

The best-thumbed book in the studio of [Dorothy Iannone](#), who has died aged 89, was a paperback edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*. As in Shakespeare's tragedy, the prevailing subject of the American artist's paintings, sculpture and video installation was intense love, ranging from the romantic to the erotic and spiritual.

Moving on from abstract paintings that incorporated lines from the play and other classics, in the 1970s Iannone created a series titled *Eros* - pictorial paintings formally influenced by Egyptian frescoes, Byzantine mosaics and ancient fertility statues that revelled in their joyful vulgarity. *Wiggle Your Ass for Me* (1970) depicts a woman poking at the anus of a man, the work's title tattooed across her midriff; in similar style is [Let Me Squeeze Your Fat Cunt](#) (1970), in which a man lies submissively across a woman's lap as she reaches for his penis. Later works ranged from an artist's book containing a list of all her lovers to *I Was Thinking of You* (1975), a video featuring the artist masturbating, the monitor mounted in a box painted with intricate erotic scenes.

This exploration of what Iannone dubbed “ecstatic unity” reached its zenith in An Icelandic Saga (1978-86), a series of 48 black-and-white annotated ink drawings in which she describes a trip made a decade previously to Reykjavik from New York with James Upham, her then husband, only for Iannone to meet and fall madly in love with the Swiss artist Dieter Roth.

At the downtown Hotel Holt she and Roth “frolicked verbally” and she allowed him to kiss the hem of her skirt. In a later panel she recalls, in spidery capitals next to portraits of the pair draped in what might be orchids, that when Upham went to buy tonic to mix with vodka, Roth tried to get Iannone into bed. She refused, but consented, she writes in the third person, “to show him her ass, an easy movement since in those days, she scorned underwear”.

She left Upham the day the couple arrived back in New York, returning to Iceland within the month from whence she made Roth her muse.



“The two of us became the stars of my work, and instead of using lines from poems which I loved in my paintings, now I recorded what we had said to each other, or I wrote my own texts. No longer was I obsessed with the high love of Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, now I had found my own.”

Dorothy was born in Boston to a family of Italian immigrants. Her father died when she was two and she was raised by her mother, Sarah Nicoletti Iannone, a seamstress and dressmaker. She recalled attending church regularly until she took communion without having confessed to sexual relations with her boyfriend, a mortal sin that caused her to abandon the Catholic faith. She later embraced Buddhism.

In 1953 Iannone enrolled at Boston University to study English and American literature, continuing as a postgraduate at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. She met and married Upham in 1958. The couple moved to New York and took up art, painting in the fashionable abstract expressionist style. Upham was from a wealthy family, and financed their trips abroad, which often lasted for months at a time. In Kyoto Iannone developed a series of collages using gold leaf and Japanese paper, and she would credit her time in Asia as having a profound influence on her turn to figuration. “Lovers gradually appeared and became more and more distinct and ... from the very beginning their genitals were not only present but extremely prominent too. This was surely an unconscious unfolding of what was in my heart,” she wrote in 1999.



One of the 48 ink drawings of Dorothy Iannone's *An Icelandic Saga*, 1978-86, describing a 1967 trip from New York to Reykjavik, where she fell in love with the artist Dieter Roth. Photograph: courtesy Air De Paris and Peres Projects, Berlin Seoul & Milan

Returning from another trip, to Paris in 1961, Iannone was stopped at a New York airport, when customs officers found a copy of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in her baggage. The book at the time was banned in the US over its explicit content. Iannone refused to say she was carrying Miller's recollections of sexual encounters for research - which might have enabled her to sidestep its confiscation - but insisted she was reading the title purely for pleasure. With the backing of the American Civil Liberties Union, she won a subsequent lawsuit against the government for the return of the paperback, effectively overturning the import ban.

In Dusseldorf, where she lived with Roth, her work became increasingly explicit and she, too, faced censorship: in 1968 a pack of tarot cards, *Ta(rot) Pack* (1968-69), depicting her and the sculptor having sex, was removed from a group show at Kunsthalle Bern. Four years later, UK customs destroyed some of Iannone's artist books. "When my work was not censored outright, it was either mildly ridiculed, or described as folkloric, or just ignored," she said years later.

After Iannone and Roth separated in 1974, she moved first to the south of France and then Berlin, on a DAAD scholarship, where she stayed until her death. She remained close to Roth, and a book of their correspondence, which continued until he died in 1998, was published in 2002.

In 1976 Iannone had her first museum show at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and in 1978, as the Iranian revolution was fermenting, her work was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, Tehran. Two years later, at the Neue Galerie, Sammlung Ludwig, in Aachen, she juxtaposed her art with a series of small bejewelled sculptures created by her mother as personal gifts and sent by post from 1959 onwards. Further works by her mother - Sarah Pucci, as she had become - were shown alongside Iannone's at Hannah Hoffman gallery, Los Angeles, in 2022.

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📷 Dorothy Iannone's *Wiggle Your Ass for Me*, 1970, right, and *Courting Ajaxander*, 1990, left, on show at the 2017 Frieze Art Fair in London. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

Though Iannone was never wholly ignored, institutional appreciation of her six decades of art increased in the 2000s. *I Was Thinking of You* was recreated at the [Tate Modern](#) in 2005 and for the 2006 Whitney Biennial. In 2009 she had her first US museum exhibition at the [New Museum](#) in New York, a small show titled *Lioness*, referring to Roth's nickname for her.

A series she started that year titled *Movie People*, of painted cut-outs mounted on wood depicting scenes from films including *Morocco*, *Lolita* and *Brokeback Mountain*, were among the works exhibited in *Innocent and Aware*, a 2013 solo show at [Camden Arts Centre](#) in London. In 2018 she was commissioned to produce a mural for the [High Line](#) in New York, portraying three colourful Statues of Liberty and the words "I Lift My Lamp Beside the Golden Door", from a poem by [Emma Lazarus](#).

A retrospective of the artist closed at the [Louisiana Museum of Modern Art](#) in Denmark in October, and another is due to open later this year at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, in her home state of Massachusetts.

● Dorothy Iannone, artist, born 9 August 1933; died 26 December 2022