



Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida

1929–1930

Ivan Albright

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center

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Ivan Albright (American, 1897–1983)

Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida, 1929–1930

Oil on canvas

142.9 x 119.2 cm (56 1/4 x 47 in.)

Gift of Ivan Albright, 1977.34

In 1929, Chicago artist Ivan Albright placed an advertisement for a model, which was answered by Ida Rogers, not yet twenty years old. The artist painted the young wife and mother—“a very decent girl,” claimed Albright—throughout the next two years, **metamorphosing** her on canvas into the **stereotype** of a piteous older woman we see in this early masterpiece of 1929–1930. Her puckered, drooping flesh squeezed into tawdry clothing sizes too small, the doleful woman sits alone at her dressing table, surrounded by a collection of objects as wasted and worn as she is. She gazes at a mirror held at such an angle that it could reflect either her sorrowful image or the empty void behind her. As if the powder puff could ward off the ravages of time, she dabs at her gray, sagging flesh in vain. To render this haunting portrait of aging and decay, Albright used lurid, dark colors, illuminated by a harsh, raking light that accentuates each blemish, each stray hair.

The son of a painter, Albright turned to painting after serving in the United States medical corps during World War I (1914–1918). The 20-year-old soldier made medical drawings, which may have contributed to the extremely detailed style of his later paintings. His creative process was painstaking. Rogers posed in Albright’s light-controlled studio in which the artist had created an elaborate dressing room stage set, complete with such decrepit props as a frayed rug, crocheted doily, smoldering cigarette stub, even a comb with wisps of hair between the teeth. He often made diagrammatic plans for color and on occasion used a tiny paintbrush with only three hairs to depict obsessively precise details. A painting could take years to complete. As Rogers recalled: “[Albright] had a little platform, a dais, and he put me on it and walked around.... He had little whatnots he put on the table.... He’d spend days and days on a little bit.... He was very slow.”

Albright transformed his subject according to his personal artistic vision. He was interested in manipulating the appearance of his sitter and setting. Thus the **perspective** of the rug and dresser tilt perilously to the right in the picture, while the checkered handkerchief seems to hover in midair. Albright’s simultaneous presentation of different vantage points not only increases the viewer’s discomfort, it also underscores Albright’s central theme and lifelong fascination: the precariousness of life and death and decay’s inevitability. In *Ida*, Albright has portrayed a modern-day **vanitas** figure surrounded by objects symbolizing this very impermanence—a mirror, flowers, money, an extinguished match. “The tomorrow of death is what appeals to me,” declared Albright in one of his many notebooks. “It is greater than life—stronger than any human ties.”

As for the real Ida Rogers, the painting reveals little. In front of the left chair leg is a peanut shell. Rogers munched peanuts during sittings, perhaps to relieve the tedium, a habit that infuriated the artist. Behind the chair is a burnt scrap of paper. Although scrolls are often found in traditional *vanitas* paintings, this singed sheet may refer to a poem the single artist (he did not marry until 1946) had written during the intense painting sessions. “Tis Ida the holy maiden I dream of/ Too perfect her face for the eyes of man,” it began, and concluded with

the lines: “I dare not look at her for fear I portray/The emotion within me—will lead me astray.” Albright gave Rogers the poem. “I looked at it and started to giggle,” Rogers later said, “and he took it and tore it up.”

Portraits often reveal something about both sitter and artist. Albright continued to examine mortality in his haunting meticulously rendered work throughout six decades. Here, the little we know about Rogers—her relative youth, her love of peanuts, her rebuff of the artist—is subsumed by Albright’s permanent portrayal of aging and decay—paradoxically long before the real Ida Rogers began to grow old.

Glossary

collage: Derived from the French verb *coller*, to gum or glue, that describes works of art made by sticking pieces of paper, or other materials, or other forms onto a flat backing. First used extensively by the **Cubists**, collage extended the boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces and other materials.

Cubism: Art movement (c. 1908–1920) led by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963) that took the pictorial elements of line, shading, light, and composition traditionally used to make a convincing illusion of three-dimensional (with depth) space on a two-dimensional (flat) surface and arranged them arbitrarily to call attention to their function as representational devices and to create images that did not attempt to recreate the appearance of the world.

metamorphosis: Transformation from one physical state to another, e.g. the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

perspective: Scientific method used by artists since the 15th century in Italy to create the illusion of three-dimensional objects and space on two-dimensional (flat) surfaces, so that they seem to appear as in nature.

stereotype: An oversimplified image that denies originality or individuality.

vanitas: From the Latin word meaning “emptiness,” referring to the emptiness and transience of earthly possessions and the inevitability of death. Often included in an allegorical still life, in which objects and/or figures symbolize an abstract quality or idea, such as vanity.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

Art

- This painting represents an aging woman. Discuss how Albright conveys this through color, lighting, texture, gesture, and setting.
- Have students collect a photograph of someone they know and cut out objects or images from magazines that reflect this person’s life, personality, and interests. Then create a **collage** portrait of this individual.

Language Arts

- Based on Albright’s painting, have students write an entry in Ida’s journal for the day of the portrait. What is she thinking and what is she getting ready for? Then, have them write an entry in the model’s journal for one day of her sitting for the portrait. How does she feel about being transformed into an old woman?

Science

- Have students collect objects with a variety of textures and place them in a paper bag. Include objects seen in the painting, such as a doily, wicker, decorative glass, flowers, rug fragment, wood, dollar bill, mirror, etc. Pass the bag around and have students feel the textures with their hands but not look at them and write a description of textures they feel. Have students identify through touch objects similar to those they see in the painting. Discuss feeling texture with your hands versus imagining it from a visual image in the painting.

Social Science

- Have students collect photographs of someone in their families. Choose photographs that reveal the person at a variety of ages from childhood through adulthood. Have students arrange the photographs in chronological order and write captions for each one.

Alternate: Have students bring in their own baby pictures and display them around the room. Have students try to identify their classmates as infants. Discuss how certain characteristics remain the same and which ones change as we mature.

Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida, 1929–30, by Ivan Albright

Produced by the Department of Museum Education
The Art Institute of Chicago

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The information in this packet was adapted from the teacher manual *Many Faces: Modern Portraits & Identities*, available through the Crown Family Educator Resource Center.

Edited by Jane H. Clarke and Margaret F. Farr

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