Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida

1929–1930

Ivan Albright
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 emo-
tion 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 art-
ist. 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 qual-
ity 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 fami-
  lies. 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.
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