

Albright, Ivan

Also known as

Albright, Ivan Le Lorraine

American, 1897 - 1983

BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Le Lorraine Albright was born on February 20, 1897, in North Harvey, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. He was descended from a family of German Moravian gunsmiths who had immigrated to America during the mid-18th century and settled near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His identical twin brother, Malvin Marr Albright (1897–1983, known by his pseudonym Zsissy), also became a noted artist. Ivan began drawing at the age of eight, receiving instruction from his father, the artist Adam Emory Albright (1862–1957), who had studied under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. From 1915 to 1917, Ivan Albright studied architecture, first at Northwestern University and then at the University of Illinois.

When the United States entered World War I, Albright served in the army as a medical illustrator at an army hospital in France; reports differ as to whether he was conscripted or enlisted. There he recorded soldiers' horrific and disfiguring injuries, many of which were the result of advances in weapons technology and military strategy (such as the widespread use of trench warfare)—an experience that surely shaped his later aesthetic. Albright eventually became chief draftsman with the American Expeditionary Force Medical Corps. After the war, he and Malvin traveled in France and very briefly studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Nantes.

Once back in Chicago in 1919, Albright briefly considered careers in chemical engineering, illustration, and architecture, but ultimately decided to become a painter. He enrolled at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied from 1920 until 1923; thereafter he spent single terms at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, and the National Academy of the Fine Arts, New York. From 1927 to 1947 he maintained a studio in Warrenville, Illinois, where his father had settled to paint and where his brother also had a studio. In 1946 he moved back to Chicago, and in 1947 he moved his studio from Warrenville to Chicago as well.

During the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s Albright developed his highly distinctive style in both painting and printmaking. His most frequent subjects were

individual figures and still lifes, sometimes a combination of the two. Albright was an expert draftsman who worked with a slow, painstaking technique to represent in extraordinary detail the havoc wrought on the human form by physical decomposition and decay. Over time his hyperrealist style took on an exaggerated effect, emphasizing every wrinkle and blemish of his sitters and utilizing dramatic, even garish lighting. The artist's grotesque portraits reflect his Platonic notion that "the body is our tomb"; the physical degeneration and squalid settings of his subjects imply a concomitant spiritual malaise.[1] He was also preoccupied with the medieval concept of *vanitas*, the idea that material things are doomed to decay and death. Albright's body of work contains shadows of his life's formative experiences, including his father's lessons in anatomical precision, the carnage he documented during World War I, and a personal predilection for morbid and macabre subjects.

Although he is often classified as a magic realist and was included in the 1943 exhibition *Realism and Magical Realism* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Albright never associated himself with any particular movement and he occupies a unique position in the history of 20th-century American art. He exhibited widely and received numerous awards and honors throughout his long career. He attained national recognition when he painted *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1943/1944, Art Institute of Chicago) for director Albert Lewin's Metro-Goldyn-Mayer film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, released in 1945.

In 1946 Albright married Josephine Medill Patterson, a newspaper heiress, writer, and aviator. The couple had two children and eventually settled permanently in Woodstock, Vermont. In 1981, Albright began a series of self-portraits at the invitation of the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Over the next two years he created about 24 such works in a variety of mediums. He died at his home in Woodstock in 1983—the same year as his twin brother.

[1] Ivan Albright, "Reflections by the Artist," in Frederick A. Sweet, *Ivan Albright* (Chicago, 1964), 17.

Robert Torchia, Zoë Samels

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