

# Ivan Albright's *Ida* and the “Object Congealed around a Soul”

Elizabeth Lee

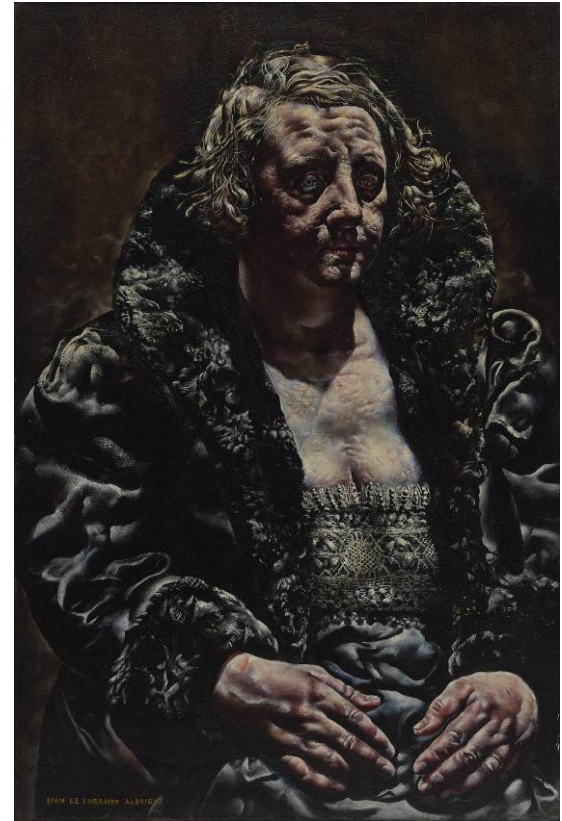
*For some time now I haven't painted pictures, per se. I make statements, ask questions, search for principles. The paint and brushes are but mere extensions of myself or scalpels if you wish.*  
—Ivan Albright<sup>1</sup>

From the start of his career in the late 1920s, the Chicago-born painter Ivan Albright was praised by critics for his precise, meticulous forms and yet also reviled for his off-putting approach to the human figure. *The Lineman* (fig. 1), for example, which won the John C. Shaffer Prize for portraiture at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1928, sparked concern when it appeared on the cover of the trade magazine *Electric Light and Power*. A. B. Gates, a manager from the Edison Company, protested the lineman's appearance as a “stoop-shouldered individual exuding an atmosphere of hopelessness and dejection,” explaining that the image failed to capture the strong, youthful stature of the typical modern American workman.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequent paintings from this period were not merely offensive; they were utterly revolting, as the artist approached his subjects with increasingly clinical detail. In *Woman* (fig. 2), Albright placed a closely cropped, half-length figure in a darkened interior illuminated by harsh white light, applying his paintbrush to the surface of the canvas as a surgeon might use a scalpel to probe a patient. Viewers were so disturbed by *Woman* when it appeared in a juried exhibition at the Toledo Museum of Art in 1929 that the painting was temporarily removed from the show. As the critic Irwin St. John Tucker asked, why would an artist “paint a woman with flesh the color of a corpse drowned six weeks [ago]?”<sup>3</sup>

*Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* (fig. 3) is Albright's most iconic work from this early period. Although it was met with a “storm of protest,” the painting won a gold medal from the Chicago Society of Artists in 1931 and in 1937 was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where, according to Edith Weigle of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, at least one critic considered it the most significant work on display. The model for the picture—Ida Rogers, a twenty-year-old wife and mother from a working-class neighborhood in Oak Park, Illinois—appears decades older on canvas. Her flesh is a corpse-like gray. Circles of puffy skin sag beneath Ida's eyes and cheeks, while wrinkles form visible creases across the ashen surface of her face, neck, arms, and legs. Ida's clothing is also haggard: a worn jacket echoing her mottled flesh hangs wearily from her body, while a camisole and patterned slip struggle to cover her drooping breasts, torso, and

- 1 Ivan Albright, *The Lineman*, 1927.  
Oil on canvas, 72½ x 36½ in.  
The Art Institute of Chicago,  
Gift of Ivan Albright, 1977.27.  
Photography © The Art Institute  
of Chicago, [www.artic.edu/aic](http://www.artic.edu/aic)
- 2 Ivan Albright, *Woman*, 1928.  
Oil on canvas, 33 x 22 in.  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
Anonymous gift. Digital Image  
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upper thighs. Ida's thighs pucker with cellulite, and her ankles appear lumpy and disfigured. Errant patches of hair crop up along the surface of her body, in addition to abraded patches of skin. Even her chair shows signs of wear, as strands of wicker uncoil beneath her seat; it rests on a rug that is threadbare and torn. The Albright biographer Michael Croydon notes that the artist completed *Ida* in a new studio with matte black walls and minimal natural light, a dark and artificial environment in which forms took on an efflorescent, almost photobiotic quality. It is within the context of these studio conditions that Albright "pitilessly search[ed] out every crease and vein" in *Ida*, as the curator Daniel Catton Rich once observed.<sup>4</sup>

Certain details of Ida's appearance—her fashionably bobbed hair, high heels, face powder, red lips, and rouged cheeks—prompted some critics to question her morality. One assumed she was an old actress, wearily applying her makeup, while others believed she was a prostitute displaying her earnings on her vanity. A *Time* critic memorably described *Ida* as a "bluish portrait of a massive, flabby, semi-nude, varicose-veined prostitute primping herself," capturing the hostile tone with which many received the painting, regardless of how individual details were read. Some took a more philosophical view. Writing for the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Tucker credited Albright with tapping into Immanuel Kant's hidden world of the noumenon, seeing *Ida* as "this soul which came into the world seeking expression through desires" yet who demonstrates the impossibility of finding fulfillment in material things.<sup>5</sup>

Tucker's remark echoes the tension between the body and the spirit—or "soul," as expressed in the full title for *Ida*—that cannot be avoided in Albright's work. The artist recorded his thoughts on such weighty matters as the nature of spirituality, beauty, life, and death in dozens of notebooks that he kept throughout his career. Many of his reflections





3 Ivan Albright, *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida*, 1929–30. Oil on canvas, 56¼ x 47 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Ivan Albright, 1977.<sup>34</sup> Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago, [www.artic.edu/aic](http://www.artic.edu/aic)

war directed his focus to physical decay and death. In the most sustained analysis on this question, the art historian Robert Cozzolino argues that the impact of the war on Albright was more spiritual in nature, causing him to realize “that a philosophical art could result from an intense meditation on corporeality and life’s animating spirit . . . as but one part of the larger universe, moved by an invisible force that is powerful, mysterious, and divine.”<sup>7</sup>

This essay considers the impact of the war on Albright’s outlook and art by introducing a new perspective that links his immersion in medical science at the front to an expanding consumer culture in 1920s America. I suggest that it was the increasing commodification of the body in modern American culture following the war—what the historian Stuart Ewen describes as a shift away from the biological body in the 1920s to a new “commodity self”—that had the most profound influence on the artist as he was establishing his career. The philosopher Wolfgang Fritz Haug has observed that capitalism not only turns the world of objects into salable goods, it also organizes and orders the body, including all sentient experience. Through an array of “attractive and seductive illusions,” Haug explains, “people are continually shown the unfulfilled aspects of their existence” and

focus on the body, which he once described as little more than the “earth shelte[r] under cover of which we live.” It was the soul, Albright pointed out, that “is life.” In perhaps his most poignant iteration on their relation, the artist explained: “The body is our tomb. Shake the dust from our soul and maybe there lies the answer for without this planetary body, without eyes the light would not hurt, without flesh the pain would not hurt, without legs our motion might accelerate, without endless restrictions our freedom greater.” Since the soul cannot be seen, Albright chose instead to depict the body as a kind of prison house, mired in the material weight of earthly existence, corruption, and despair.<sup>6</sup>

Critics and scholars have struggled to explain Albright’s macabre sensibility and to understand what motivated his vision. Many have assumed that his aesthetic was shaped by his contact with mutilated soldiers when he served as a medical draftsman during World War I. From this “gruesome assignment,” the curator Frederick Sweet asserts, there is “more than a germ of his later preoccupation with the merciless analysis of human flesh,” as if Albright’s first-hand exposure to bodies ravaged by

promised commodities that will provide them “a sense of meaningfulness . . . [and] a language to interpret their existence and the world.” Albright’s morose, decrepit figures defy the surface gloss of commercial culture by insisting on the body’s imperfect physicality, on its every unseemly wrinkle, mole, and pore.<sup>8</sup>

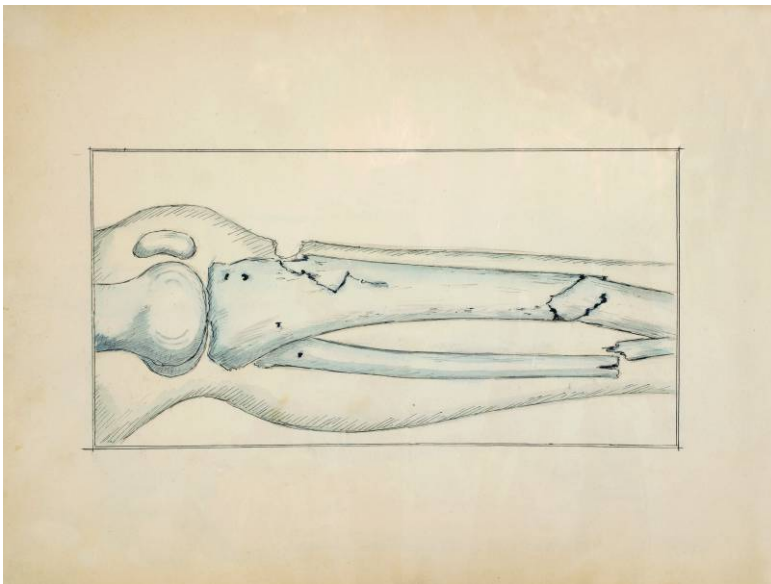
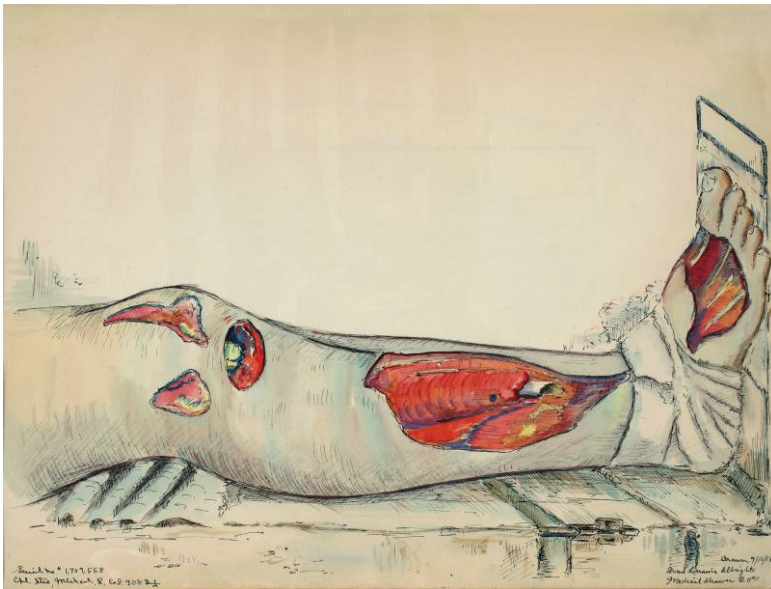
Rejecting what he viewed as a culture obsessed by superficial appearance, Albright created paintings with ruminative, philosophical titles, such as *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida*, that defy easy explanation or analysis. Unlike his artist father, Adam Emory Albright, who specialized in lighthearted outdoor genre scenes, Ivan wanted to “make statements, ask questions, [and] search for principles” with his art. He hoped to “jar the observer into thinking” and to “make him uncomfortable” through grisly transformations of the figure. He did so with a critical perspective on what he viewed as a facile consumer culture that had dispensed with the gravitas intrinsic to the human form. Albright also believed that this burgeoning consumer culture had fundamentally transformed the art market and what counted as art. He developed this point of view over time, starting with his direct exposure to mutilated soldiers while working as a medical draftsman during World War I.<sup>9</sup>

### The Body and World War I

Albright enlisted in the U.S. Army in early 1918 and was assigned to serve in the medical corps at Base Hospital 11 in Nantes, France. When a surgeon at the hospital realized that Albright could draw, he asked the young artist to record soldiers’ wounds and surgical procedures; he filled eight notebooks during his brief four months of service.<sup>10</sup> Medical illustration was not an official military assignment during World War I but a job the surgeons “literally created for me,” Albright told the *Chicago Daily News* in 1931. In choosing his subjects, the artist explained in an interview with the curator Paul Cummings, he “pick[ed] out the most interesting cases, the ones who had, say, the most shots.” He continued, “I drew one chap who had a hundred and thirty-six pieces of shrapnel in him; they weren’t too big, from the size of your thumbnail to maybe four times that size, but all over.”<sup>11</sup>

When asked about the impact of this military service on his later work in the fine arts, Albright denied any influence. However, he did acknowledge that his exposure to a new medical technology—the X-ray machine—made a lasting impression: “Imagine looking right through the human body!” he exclaimed, “It was the best art training I ever had.” As he told the *Chicago Daily News* reporter Sterling North, “I could by studying closely the record on each plate, imagine that I saw every human body as though it were translucent.” Albright knew and admired the work of such old masters as Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, and Hans Holbein, and confessed in his notebooks that he wanted to “beat” them. Looking *through* the body meant moving past Renaissance conceptions of anatomy, mass, and volume to embrace a modern notion of the human form as a transparent surface—or skin—whose interior was visible to the naked eye. Cozzolino writes that the X-ray was a “source for [Albright’s] interest in representation and the imperceptible,” linking his work to the “modernists, spiritualists, psychologists, and theosophists to describe a higher consciousness.” X-ray technology also heightened the artist’s awareness of the body’s material presence. As Albright explained in a 1932 statement, “All that we perceive [with the naked eye] is a world of surfaces. The real center is never seen. But it is just that which the artist should strive to find and body forth.” This is the charge Albright set for himself in his early career as a painter: to depict the body’s “real center” through figures that are both stubbornly physical and opaque. These figures force the realization, as one critic observed, that “the human form is an object congealed around a soul.” Indeed, his paintings bring the viewer into intimate contact with the human form as a complex living organism.<sup>12</sup>





A brief look at two drawings from Albright's wartime sketchbooks suggest how X-ray vision informed his artistic conceptualization of the human body. In the first (fig. 4), he records an injury to a soldier's lower leg in which the most brutally wounded portions—at the knee, shin, and foot—serve as windows into the body's fleshy interior, including glimpses of the bone that lies beneath. This drawing shows how the wounds appeared to the artist with the naked eye. On the adjacent page of the sketchbook (fig. 5), Albright offers an X-ray view of the same injury, bypassing the bloody, visceral gashes to picture flesh as if it were transparent and to show bone as clean and white. The technologically mediated perspective of the X-ray is at once more revealing—it precisely locates the root of the injury in a fractured bone—and more obfuscatory in that the broken bone is wholly disassociated from the soldier's wounded flesh. The artist's framing of each image underscores this distinction. In the first drawing, the patient's toes, his bandaged ankle, and his supported leg and foot all provide context and detail that point to the nature and impact of his wounds and show them physically connected to the patient. In the X-ray-inspired drawing, by contrast, Albright focuses more narrowly on the knee and shin, omitting any sense of the individual they serve.

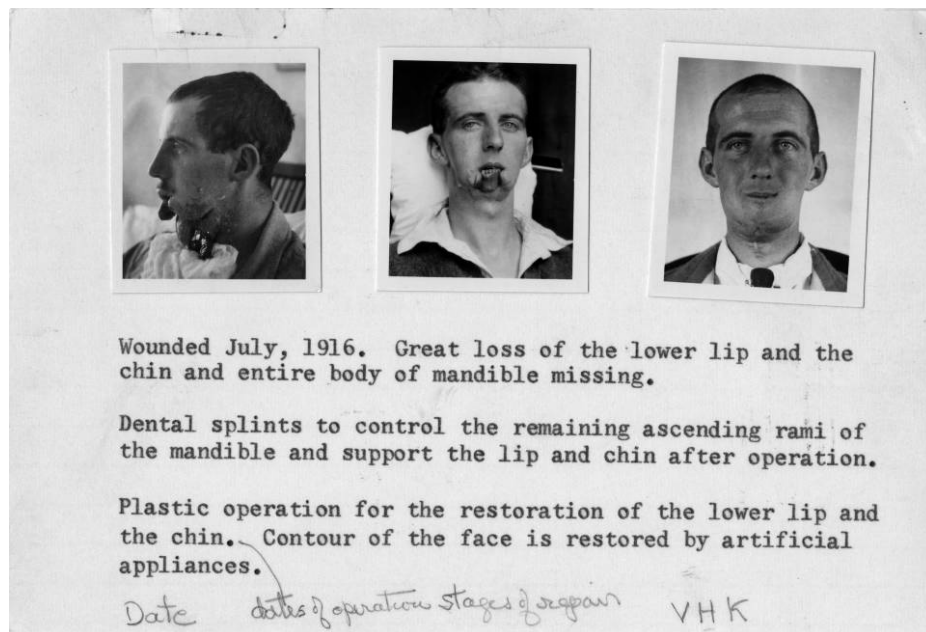
A decade later, the bodies in Albright's paintings are defined by their corporeality and flesh. On the one hand, in a painting such as *Ida*, skin functions as the body's outer envelope, acting as a barrier that blocks access to the interior laid bare by X-ray technology. Yet the very nature of *Ida*'s corpse-like flesh suggests a rupture between the body's public, visible exterior and its abject inner realm. While it is unclear whether *Ida*'s skin

is rough and discolored from age, neglect, or illness, her flesh stops short of fulfilling its function as a container for the body's grotesque interior. Albright builds up color, tone, and texture on this highly visible, outer layer of the body, using his paintbrush to perform what Rich once described as "a rabid, delicate autopsy on skin and tissue." The artist thus inhabits a realm somewhere between the surgeon and the mortician, working at the interface of life and death.<sup>13</sup>

This interface blurred with special poignancy in the aftermath of World War I. Modern weaponry and new forms of battle produced injuries that medical science was ill equipped to address. For example, at the start of the war, no surgeon was trained in treating maxo-facial wounds, nor were there any books available on the subject of general plastic surgery. Dentists were as well prepared as anyone to deal with faces blown apart by shrapnel, hand grenades, high-speed rifles, and machine guns—and were often the first to respond.

4 Ivan Albright, page from medical sketchbook, ca. 1918. Watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper, 9 x 12 in. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

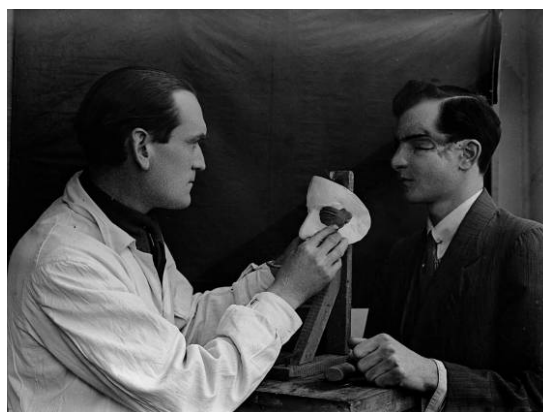
5 Ivan Albright, page from medical sketchbook, ca. 1918. Watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper, 9 x 12 in. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library



6 Photographs documenting reconstructive surgery following July 16, 1916, wounds to lower lip, mouth, and chin. Varaztad Hovhannes Kazanjian Papers, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School

7 Captain Francis Derwent Wood puts the finishing touches to a cosmetic plate and compares it to the face of the disfigured patient for whom the plate is being made, Third London General Hospital, 1916. Imperial War Museum, Photograph Archive Collection. Image © IWM

8 "When Mrs. Ladd has completed the moulded resemblance a copper reproduction is made, which is first silvered and coated with enamel, and finally painted in flesh colors," July 1918. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-137180



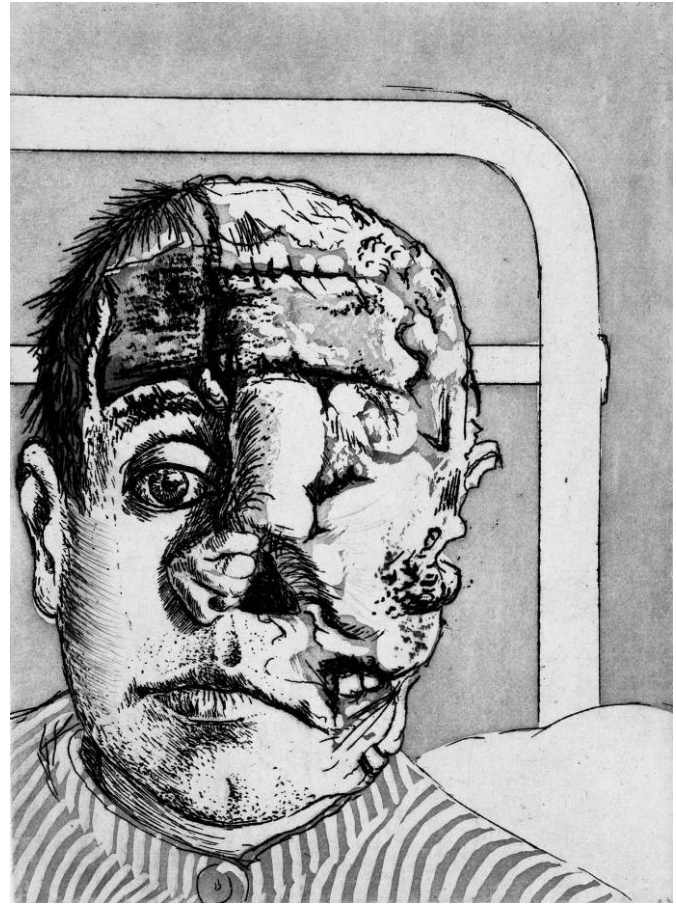
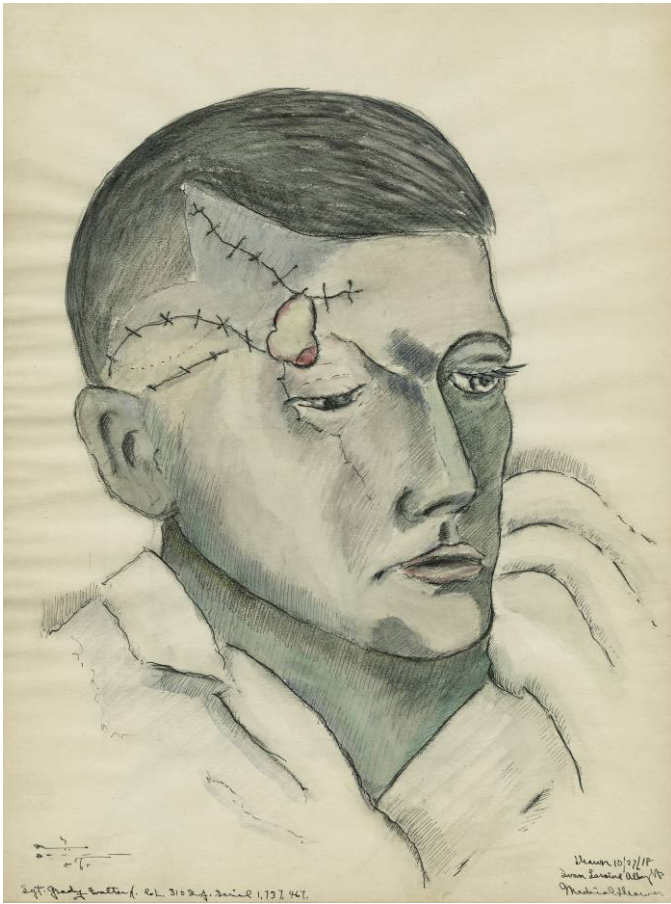
Dr. Varaztad Kazanjian became a pioneer in plastic surgery during the war as chief dental officer in the Harvard Unit, a special medical support unit organized in 1915 by Harvard University. Kazanjian was known for his prosthetic appliances used to frame and restore the jaw, followed by plastic surgery to correct any facial deformities. In 1916 he operated on a corporal who lost his lower lip and chin to explosives (fig. 6). By building dental splints to support the remaining mandible, Dr. Kazanjian was able to restore functionality and appearance, resulting in what many referred to as a surgical "masterpiece."<sup>14</sup>

When surgery was insufficient, artists were hired to create prosthetic faces (fig. 7). The English sculptor Francis Derwent Wood established the Masks for Facial Disfigurement Department (known as the "Tin Noses Shop") in the Third London General Hospital, where he designed copper masks that covered a portion of the face with a molded plate 1/32 inch thick "to make a man's face as near as possible to what it looked like before he was wounded." With the help of prewar photographs, Wood worked to restore the missing features "as they were in life" with the hope that the patient would acquire "his old self-respect, self-assurance, self-reliance [so that] his presence is no longer a source of melancholy to himself nor of sadness to his relatives and friends," the sculptor explained.<sup>15</sup>

The American sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd created "lifelike" masks for the American Red Cross Studio for Portrait Masks for Mutilated Soldiers in Paris (fig. 8).

Ladd cut eyelashes from fine copper threads and used oil paint to render the eyes with greater depth than artificial ones afforded. In coloring her masks, she took into account changes in skin tone that occur under sunny and cloudy conditions as well as the bluish tinge associated with shaven cheeks. The conflation of the natural and the artificial was





- 9 Ivan Albright, page from medical sketchbook, ca. 1918. Watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper, 12 x 9 in. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library
- 10 Otto Dix, *Skin Graft* (*Transplantation*) from *The War* (*Der Krieg*), 1924. Etching, aquatint, and drypoint, 18 ½ x 13 ⅝ in. The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller ©2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

almost complete: “At a slight distance, so harmonious are both the moulding and the tinting, it is impossible to detect the join where the live skin of cheek or nose leaves off and the imitation complexion of the mask begins,” wrote one period observer. For Ladd, however, the goal was not only to conceal a soldier’s mutilation, “but to put in the mask part of the man himself—that is the man he had been before the tragedy,” as the art historian Claudine Mitchell writes.<sup>16</sup>

This was a goal shared by the doctors Albright served, as indicated in a post-surgical drawing of Sargeant Grady Walter with lines of stitches that conceal what was once an open, bloody wound (fig. 9). With time, Grady’s facial injury will be hard to discern: his scars will fade and his hair will return and at least partly cover any scars that remain. Albright’s drawing thus serves as a record of the surgeon’s ability to manage a wound that would have previously been severely disfiguring, if not fatal. This was a significant claim for modern medicine. As Mrs. William Vanderbilt observed in 1916 on a visit to the American Ambulance Hospital in France, wartime surgery takes these “torn, mutilated beings, without any faces, who would otherwise be unbearably repulsive and almost certainly economically dependent, and makes them over.” The “big thing” at the hospital, as she put it, was “re-making,” turning wounded soldiers into “normal men again.” Even when surgery stopped short of achieving this goal, artists such as Wood and Ladd stepped in with their carefully crafted masks in an effort to make these men passable, if not entirely convincing, versions of their prewar selves.<sup>17</sup>

While Albright supported the effort of turning maimed soldiers into “normal men again” with his surgical sketchbooks, the paintings he made a decade later run counter



to wartime narratives of restoration insofar as they revel in the body's pathology, its inability to be healed or remade. In repudiating the war's claims to surgical and other cosmetic victory, Albright's work resonates with that of the German Neue Sachlichkeit artist Otto Dix, who spent three years in a heavy machine gun battery and was wounded several times in battle. Dix reserved his most brutal scenes for a suite of fifty etchings (*The War*, 1924) that consciously recall Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War*, though he takes the viewer on a tour of duty through scenes inspired by his own memories of the trenches. Prints in the War Series, such as *Skin Graft (Transplantation)* (fig. 10), refuse to deflect attention from how the conflict turned men into monstrous versions of themselves, pressing on the boundaries of the recognizably human. Such works record the hideous, often irreparable injuries that became an emblem of the war.<sup>18</sup>

One of Dix's best-known paintings, *Prager Strasse* (fig. 11), which depicts a mutilated war veteran in front of a set of window displays featuring women's corsets and wigs, links the devastating violence unleashed on the male soldier during the war to the postwar beauty culture designed to remake the female body through commercial products—a trajectory that resonates with Albright's *Ida*. As the cultural analyst Tim Armstrong has argued, the disabled veteran and the female consumer come together in *Prager Strasse* through their shared interest in “prosthesis as a macabre accompaniment to the commodification of beauty.” Whether as a literal prosthesis in the form of an artificial limb or, in more abstract terms, a commercial accessory such as a corset or

wig that attempts to enhance a natural attribute, the prosthetic attempts to “complete” an otherwise deficient figure. The first, according to Armstrong, operates as a “negative” prosthesis, replacing a body part or covering up a lack; the second serves as a “positive” prosthesis, enhancing the individual's natural capacity. Both are linked through a capitalist economy built around consumption. As Armstrong puts it, “the maiming of bodies in war is an intensification of a more general consumption of bodies in capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> The parallels are hard to miss in Dix's chaotic scene, with its parade of canes and artificial limbs along the sidewalk before a shop window in which prosthetics are displayed for sale. Ironically, a white plastic arm and leg gesture provocatively from behind the glass toward a corset-wearing torso that may at first appear to model the ideal female form unscathed by war, but whose details—missing limbs, metal braces, and a mangled head and face—only add to a scene of violence and devastation in which beauty has been effaced. Like Dix, Albright takes a critical view of the body following the war, though from a different aesthetic perspective. His paintings question the narrative of recovery celebrated by modern medicine. They also respond to consumerism and the rise of beauty culture in the 1920s, which continued the war's story of progress on the ways in which bodies could be remade and transformed.

- 11 Otto Dix, *Prager Strasse*, 1920. Oil and collage on canvas, 39 ¾ x 32 in. Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Germany © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn





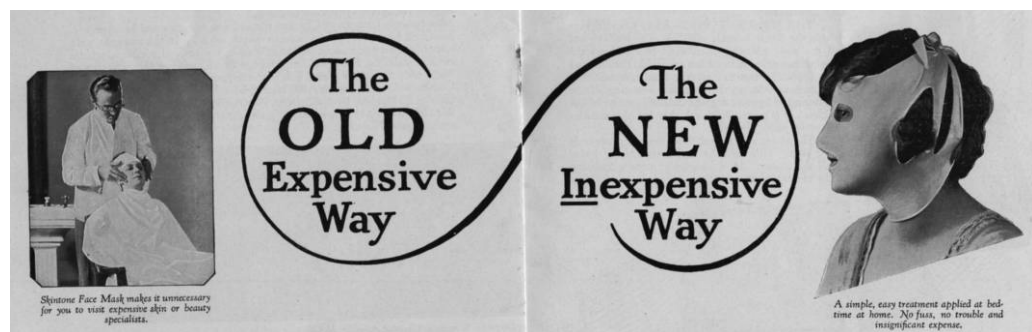
## Putting on Faces after World War I

In the postwar era, the body became a target of corporate advertising aimed at persuading consumers that the right products could make them more appealing. The hook with many of these products—like Listerine, which had been sold for years as a general antiseptic but was reinvented in the 1920s as a remedy for bad breath—was based less on any actual ailment or biological need than on personal insecurities coupled with the promise of social success. A 1923 advertisement for Amolin deodorant powder highlights the product's "antiseptic, soothing and healing" qualities, while also suggesting that it will bring "the mental comfort, the peace of mind, that comes with *knowing* you are beyond criticism." Likewise, an advertisement for the Skintone Face Mask (fig. 12), a commercial product that eerily echoes both the gas masks that were used as protection against chemical warfare in World War I and the facial masks constructed by Wood and Ladd, appeals to consumers on the grounds that it can "eliminate unsightly lines and hollows, double chins and pouches" while also leading to "new social triumphs" through "the marvelously quick improvement in your appearance." The biological body during the 1920s thus began to be replaced by a commodity self that could be marketed to "people who were unhappy or could be convinced that they were unhappy about their lives" and taught to cultivate each portion of the body in the interest of creating an overall "successful assemblage." According to this logic, appearance was not something to be taken for granted—it was something to be *made*. As the historian Elizabeth Haiken observes in her history of cosmetic surgery, "by 1921 most Americans (and particularly American women) had come to understand physical beauty as an external, independent—and thus alterable—quality, the pursuit of which demanded a significant amount of time, attention, and money."<sup>20</sup>

Haiken also demonstrates how the techniques developed by wartime surgeons to remake mutilated soldiers were quickly adapted in the postwar period to meet the needs of a growing consumer culture. Although modern beauty surgery can be traced to the late nineteenth century, it was only with World War I that it entered the mass cultural consciousness: if disfigured soldiers could return home with new faces, as the surgeon Max Thorek put it, "why couldn't women whose faces had been ravaged by nothing more explosive than the hand of the years find again the firm clear contours of youth?" The American Association of Plastic Surgeons was founded in 1921, mostly by doctors who had worked in medical facilities that treated wounded soldiers. These individuals became key figures in the profession, lending it credibility at a time when many remained suspicious of so-called beauty doctors.<sup>21</sup>

While some claimed cosmetic surgery was nothing more than an exercise in vanity, psychologists emphasized the link between personal appearance and emotional health. As Ladd had realized years earlier, facial wounds were understood as "both a

12 Susanna Cocroft, *The Overnight Way to a New Complexion*. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.





13 Norman Rockwell, *Going Out*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 32¼ x 24½ in. Private collection. Illustration ©SEPS licensed by Curtis Licensing, Indianapolis, Ind., all rights reserved

surgical and a social problem.” Hence, the efforts of wartime doctors to turn soldiers into “normal men again” parallel the attempts of ordinary civilians in 1920s America to alter how they looked in a consumer culture predicated on the commodification of the body. Perhaps, as David Lubin has recently argued, this drive toward beautification could even be considered a “reaction on the part of the American public to unsightly, war-induced injuries, scars, and deformities.” Regardless, cosmetic surgery became a valuable tool for achieving psychic normalcy in a society that increasingly valued first impressions and positive self-esteem: by 1923, less than a decade after Kazanjian reconstructed a corporal’s face, it was possible for a nose job for the Ziegfeld Follies star Fanny Brice to elicit a media frenzy.<sup>22</sup>

Albright’s figures respond to this culture of appearance by reversing the logic of personal improvement: his models look older than their actual age, and their skin seems more mottled and scabrous than in reality. Against the advice of the period beauty writer Kathryn Murray, who assured her female readers that the face “need no longer be a record of one’s past, it need no longer reveal the tale of hidden, hard places in one’s life,” Albright embraced a version of the body in which lived experience is mapped across every inch of flesh. A comparison of *Ida* with Norman Rockwell’s nearly contemporaneous painting *Going Out* (fig. 13) highlights the Chicago artist’s deviation from period conventions.

Rockwell’s svelte, well-coiffed, fresh-faced young woman preparing for an evening out is just the kind of figure the leading beauty writers had in mind. She checks her appearance in a hand-held mirror as a young girl and small dog respond with attentive admiration, much as Rockwell’s audience would have been expected to do. Albright inverts this idiom in *Ida*, burying the outward vitality that suffuses Rockwell’s image beneath his sitter’s soulful expression, drawing deep into a reflective inner realm. Here the hand-held mirror is not an instrument of self-display but a tool of introspection. As previous scholars have observed, the theme of the woman at her vanity gazing in a mirror links *Ida* to a centuries-old *vanitas* tradition in which viewers are reminded of the fragility of life and inevitability of death. The objects on *Ida*’s bureau—flowers, a burning cigarette, and spending cash, none of which will last—underscore this message of ephemerality, as does *Ida*’s action of applying powder to her chest as though she is trying to disguise signs of her age.<sup>23</sup>

*Ida*’s cosmetics, including the tin of powder on her vanity, along with the rouge and lipstick visible on her face, also suggest a more contemporary context that draws on consumer culture. According to the historian Kathy Peiss, the number of American perfume and cosmetics manufacturers practically doubled between 1909 and 1927. Face powder alone had become a \$2.5 million business for a single company by 1927, and, by the end of the decade, there were three thousand different types of face powders on the market. It is not only that more cosmetics were available than ever before, but women were increasingly expected to wear them. Not unlike the plastic surgery, prostheses, and face masks designed for injured soldiers, makeup functioned as a form of artifice to construct a socially acceptable appearance. Wartime surgeons and sculptors and female consumers alike were charged with putting on faces.<sup>24</sup>



Albright's paintings question the assumptions underlying period efforts to make a face. Cosmetics are typically used to create a more lively, youthful appearance, but in *Ida* the opposite is true. Her rouged cheeks and lips exist at odds with the ashen pallor of her powdered skin, adding another layer of pigment that only further deforms the figure. Indeed, Albright's approach to *Ida*'s cosmetics has more in common with that of the funeral parlor than the bedroom vanity. In his notebooks, the artist asserted his belief that the definition of beauty "depends on the nature of the mind, irrespective of any real quality in the admired object." Thus, *Ida* might be read as Albright's "statement" to modern-day viewers surrounded by seductive advertisements and new commercial products that real beauty cannot be purchased from a department-store shelf; it resides "within one and not without," as he once put it. Perhaps surprisingly, the artist communicates his message about inner beauty and the soul through an emphasis on surface detail, creating a hyper-awareness of the body's outer envelope only to draw the viewer into a realm literally and metaphorically built on interiority and depth.<sup>25</sup>

### Art and Commodity Culture

Albright's resistance to commercial beauty was part of a larger critique of American consumer culture, the effects of which he experienced profoundly in his career as an artist. The son of a painter, he was determined not to become one himself. Albright initially pursued a career in architecture, taking classes at the University of Illinois, Urbana, and interning at a Chicago architectural firm until he realized, as he told Cummings, that the work "was mostly plumbing and plans and square feet and location and how many stories." Albright was also troubled to learn that architecture was "big business" and that he "might also have to become a salesman" to pursue it. He was similarly disappointed by the commercial focus of his brief stint in advertising at the Albert Pick & Company hotel chain. In January 1920 Albright enrolled in classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, having reached the conclusion that, "The only thing I could do was paint." His decision was driven not only by his interest in the medium but also by the creative independence he imagined the enterprise would allow. "As a painter," Albright reasoned, "you don't need a client; you can be truer to yourself."<sup>26</sup>

However, Albright found that the world of fine art was hardly immune to commercial pressures; it had, in the artist's words, already "entered the quantity field, like the automobile," becoming "a typical American product." Albright was determined to pursue the field without being a "short-term artist" like his father, whom he believed created art primarily with an eye toward the market. As he explained to Cummings, "I wasn't going to make a thing fast and sell it. I don't care much if a picture is hanging on a wall. . . . A painting should be a bit of your philosophy and that's what I've been working for." This was an easy position for Albright to assume, since he was not dependent on art sales for financial stability. Ironically, his father supported him for decades through the sales of his "short-term" paintings and profits from his real estate investments. In 1946 Albright married Josephine Medill Patterson Reeve, daughter of a wealthy newspaper editor and publisher, whose family then financed his career. Not needing to sell work to make a living, Albright could "maintain a state of purity untainted by commerce," as Cummings has observed.<sup>27</sup>

This advantageous financial situation allowed the artist to insist that he "wouldn't touch" dealers, and indeed Albright did everything he could to avoid selling his work. In 1942, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, awarded *The Door* (1931–41, The Art Institute of Chicago) first place in its *Artists for Victory* exhibition,

- 14 Ivan Albright, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1943/44. Oil on canvas, 85 x 42 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Ivan Albright, 1977.21. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago, [www.artic.edu/aic](http://www.artic.edu/aic)



which included a \$3,500 prize to purchase the painting, Albright refused to accept the payment. Instead, he set the price of the canvas at \$125,000, an astronomical sum that he knew the museum could never afford. Five years later, he exhibited *The Door* at London's Tate Gallery for the same price, confirming his reputation, according to the art administrator Holger Cahill, as "one of the most high priced painters in the world."<sup>28</sup> Albright's motive in setting impossibly high prices becomes clearer through his exchange with Huntington Hartford, the A&P supermarket heir. When Hartford showed interest in purchasing one of the artist's paintings, Albright quoted him a price of around half a million dollars, adding, "You're in the canned good business. Keep on buying them." In Albright's mind, selling his art to a grocery store magnate would have been the ultimate concession to market values, akin to turning his painting into "a typical American product." Instead, the artist kept most of his work until late in life, when he donated it to the Art Institute of Chicago, a museum he had known since childhood. There his paintings could reside in the company of the European masterpieces Albright so admired and that so clearly belonged to another time and place.<sup>29</sup>

## Coda

It is telling that *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* is the painting that brought Albright to the attention of the MGM film director Albert Lewin, who commissioned the artist to paint the late, corrupt version of Dorian Gray for his 1945 film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, based on Oscar Wilde's eponymous novel (fig. 14). Wilde's narrative revolves around Gray, a debonair London bachelor, and a newly completed portrait that captures his youthful innocence and handsome good looks. As the story begins, Gray wishes that the portrait would absorb the effects of experience and age, allowing him to retain his youth forever: "I would give my soul for that," he proclaims. His wish is granted, and as the narrative develops, Gray's growing capacity for hedonistic pleasure and cruelty toward others alters the nature of his character, though the portrait alone carries the visual evidence of his age and sin. At the end of the film, Albright's painting of Gray appears on the screen in close-up, every inch of the canvas seething with the rot of Gray's vice-ridden existence. It is a startling Technicolor moment—the only appearance of color in an otherwise black-and-white film—that must have electrified audiences with its creepiness and debauched horror. The award-winning film briefly made Albright an unlikely Hollywood celebrity, but, more important, it confirmed Lewin's choice: no artist in America was better suited to respond to this classic tale of the falseness of beauty and youthful appearance than Ivan Albright.



## Notes

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- 1 Phylis Floyd, "Ivan Albright: The Vermonter (If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death)," in *Ivan Albright: The Late Self-Portraits* (Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1986), 18.
- 2 "'Lineman' Winning Painting at Institute Stirs Workers," *Chicago Daily Journal*, May 14, 1928.
- 3 Quoted in "Albright, an 'Old Master,' from Illinois," *Art Digest* 5, no. 1 (October 1, 1930): 6.
- 4 "Lavender & Old Bottles," *Time*, November 24, 1941, 81. Edith Weigle, "The Genius of Ivan Albright," *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, January 27, 1963, 25. Michael Croydon, *Ivan Albright* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978), 50, 55. Daniel Catton Rich, "Ivan Le Lorraine Albright: Our Own Jeremiah," *Magazine of Art* 36, no. 2 (February 1943): 50.
- 5 On *Ida* as an actress, see "Albright's Aging 'Ida' Repeats Her 1931 Chicago Triumph in Springfield," *Art Digest* 11, no. 9 (February 1, 1937): 12; as a prostitute, see Weigle, "Genius of Ivan Albright," 25, and "Lavender & Old Bottles," 18. Irwin St. John Tucker is quoted in "Albright's 'Ida' Wins Chicago Gold Medal," *Art Digest* 6, no. 6 (December 15, 1931): 6.
- 6 Ivan Albright, Notebooks, vols. 1–13, 1913–1940, and vols. 14–30, 1940–1968, Ivan Albright Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago. "Reflections by the Artist," in Frederick A. Sweet, *Ivan Albright: A Retrospective Exhibition Organized by the Art Institute of Chicago in Collaboration with the Whitney Museum of American Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1964), 17.
- 7 Sweet, *Ivan Albright*, 14. Robert Cozzolino, "Every Picture Should Be a Prayer: The Art of Ivan Albright" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison, 2006), 64.
- 8 Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 47. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1986), 8, 52.
- 9 Floyd, "Ivan Albright: The Vermonter," 18. Katherine Kuh, "Ivan Albright," in Kuh, *The Open Eye: In Pursuit of Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 5.
- 10 Albright filled eight sketchbooks. He gave some away, and at least one was stolen. Two of the three extant volumes belong to the University of Chicago; the third is owned by the Art Institute of Chicago. Courtney Graham Donnell, *Ivan Albright* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1997), 84.
- 11 Sterling North, "The Man Who Drew Wounds: Portrait of a Painter," *Chicago Daily News*, August 5, 1931. The artist believed he "was the chief if not the only medical drawer with the American Expeditionary Forces." *An Exhibition of Medical Drawings by Ivan Lorraine Albright* (Chicago: Renaissance Society at the Univ. of Chicago, 1972), n.p.; and North, "Man Who Drew Wounds." Oral History Interview with Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, February 5, 1972 [conducted by Paul Cummings], Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 9.
- 12 Jan van der Marck, "Ivan Albright: More Than Meets the Eye," *Art in America* 65, no. 16 (November–December 1977): 96. North, "Man Who Drew Wounds." Albright, Notebooks, vols. 14–30, 1940–1968. Cozzolino, "Every Picture," 73. See Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, "Statement," in *Art of Today: Chicago 1933*, ed. J. Z. Jacobson (Chicago: L. M. Stein, 1932), 35, for "all that we perceive." "Growth and Death," *Newsweek* 64 (November 23, 1964): 105.
- 13 Rich, "Ivan Le Lorraine Albright," 51.
- 14 On the situation at the start of the war, see Richard B. Stark, "The History of Plastic Surgery in Wartime," in "Symposium on War Injuries," ed. Richard B. Stark, special issue, *Clinics in Plastic Surgery* 2, no. 4 (October 1975): 511. Hagop Martin Deranian, *Miracle Man of the Western Front: Dr. Varaztad H. Kazanjian, Pioneer Plastic Surgeon* (Worcester, Mass.: Chandler House, 2007), 67–69, 96.
- 15 Francis Derwent Wood, "Masks for Facial Wounds," *Lancet*, June 23, 1917, 949.
- 16 Claudine Mitchell, "Facing Horror: Women's Work, Sculptural Practice and the Great War," in *Work and the Image II: Work in Modern Times; Visual Mediations and Social Processes*, ed. Valerie Mainz and Griselda Pollock (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000), 41. Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 32.
- 17 Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 32.

- 18 Albright saw Dix's art in 1926 through its widespread exhibition and reproduction in the United States. Susan S. Weininger, "Ivan Albright in Context," in Donnell, *Ivan Albright*, 66–67.
- 19 Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 98, 78.
- 20 Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 18. Susanna Cocroft, "The Overnight Way to a New Complexion," Cosmetics, box 1, folder 25, Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, ca. 1724–1977, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 47. Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 19.
- 21 Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 18.
- 22 Ibid., 29. See also David M. Lubin, *Flags and Faces: The Visual Culture of America's First World War* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2015), 51. Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 1.
- 23 Kathryn Murray, "Facial Beauty Culture," Cosmetics, box 3, folder 19, Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, ca. 1724–1977, Archives Center, National Museum of American History. On *Ida* as a *vanitas*, see, for instance, Croydon, *Ivan Albright*, 49–50; and Weininger, "Ivan Albright in Context," 61–62.
- 24 Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 97, 100, 103.
- 25 Efrat Tseñlon, *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life* (London: Sage, 1995), 114. Albright, Notebooks, vols. 1–13, 1913–1940.
- 26 Albright, Oral History, 9. Donnell, *Ivan Albright*, 202n22. Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 23. Donnell, *Ivan Albright*, 19. Kuh, *Artist's Voice*, 23.
- 27 Ivan Albright, "Chicago's Foremost Painter Takes Issue with Art Critic," *Chicago Daily News*, December 13, 1939, 17. Albright, Oral History, 2. Donnell, *Ivan Albright*, 28, notes that the artist also made money through odd jobs, especially carpentry work in renovating old houses around Warrenville, Illinois. Albright, Oral History, 2. Paul Cummings, *Artists in Their Own Words* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 49.
- 28 Albright, Oral History, 53. Donnell, *Ivan Albright*, 32, 38. Oral History Interview with Holger Cahill, April 12 and 15, 1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The art historian Lloyd Goodrich agreed that Albright's prices were extraordinary. He confided to William Benton through Anne Cronin that Albright "is in a class by himself as far as the prices he puts on his pictures." Anne Cronin to William Benton, November 18, 1958, William Benton Papers, 1940–1983, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 4073, frame 59. Putting these numbers in context, Donnell writes (28) that at a time when "most Chicago artists were charging \$300 to \$500 for an oil, Ivan listed prices ranging from \$8,500 to \$13,000 for his major paintings."
- 29 Albright, Oral History, 53. Cozzolino, "Every Picture," 8. Albright did sell a number of works to Earle and Mary Ludgin in the mid-1930s and to William Benton in the mid-1960s.