NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

Ivan Albright
American, 1897 - 1983

# *There Were No Flowers Tonight*

1929

oil on canvas
overall: 122.7 x 76.9 cm (48 5/16 x 30 1/4 in.)
framed: 144.8 x 98.7 x 5.1 cm (57 x 38 7/8 x 2 in.)
Inscription: lower left: IVAN LE LORRAINE ALBRIGHT
Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith 1972.7.1

**ENTRY**

Ivan Albright executed this painting sometime between January and April 1929, when he took an extended working vacation to Laguna Beach, California. At the time he was suffering from severe back pain that he mistakenly believed was symptomatic of a fatal illness. He had just completed what he feared would be his last work, *Heavy the Oar to Him Who is Tired, Heavy the Coat, Heavy the Sea* (1929, The Art Institute of Chicago). During this period of uncertainty Albright began to produce the subjects for which he is best remembered today: dark and disturbing full-length representations of bedraggled men and women whose physical flaws are painstakingly delineated in a hyperrealist manner. These imperfect and unflattering images often engendered public controversy. *Woman* (1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York), for instance, offended viewers when it was exhibited at the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, in July 1929. [1] And although the imagery of *There Were No Flowers Tonight* is less extreme than many of Albright's other works, it also shocked many visitors when it was first shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1931.

Albright's model for this work was Lady Frances Curie Milburne, a niece of the Duke of Northumberland, who was in Laguna Beach acting in amateur theatrical productions. The Art Institute of Chicago's press bulletin noted Albright's odd, singular approach: "The modeling of this young woman is remarkable. There is a sculptural quality about the painting that gives the arms, bosom and legs a genuine third dimensional quality. But there is something peculiar and individual about the


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painting which arrests the visitor at once. It is the color. There is only one painter in the United States using that strange color and that meticulous technique." [2] Eleanor Jewett of the *Chicago Tribune* described its subject as "gray, puffed like a pneumatic tire, with legs that astonish and a bosom that affrights the observer." [3] A Philadelphia critic had previously remarked that the painting was "low in tone and somewhat depressing in its effect." [4]

Albright presents the aging ballerina in a moment of introspection after a performance. Pressed up against the picture plane and filling the composition, she leans forward to remove her left ballet slipper and seems to intrude into the viewer's space. A small sketch of the painting in one of Albright's notebooks [fig. 1] shows the figure placed within a cube, suggesting that he wanted to define her form with a strong sense of volume. [5] The woman gazes absently in the general direction of a bouquet made, as the work's title stresses, not of flowers but of oak leaves (a symbol of faith and endurance in adversity) that rests on the floor in the left foreground. Her distinctly tattered appearance is far removed from the lithe, athletic figure one normally associates with a ballerina, and indicates that she is past her prime. Emerging in stark relief from the dark background, the woman's physical imperfections are depicted with unrelenting detail in a range of peculiar, rather sickly colors. [6] Repelled by the painting, a critic reported that Albright's "pictures of women give me the gooseflesh; they look like a horrible satire on the female species, painted by a bitter misanthrope." [7]

In accordance with his habit of composing titles that encourage viewers to imagine a narrative and contemplate the philosophical meaning of his unconventional subjects, Albright first titled the Gallery's painting *Midnight* before changing it to *There Were No Flowers Tonight*. The painting's original title suggested a fading performer whose day in the limelight was ending. *There Were No Flowers Tonight* similarly indicates that the older dancer no longer receives accolades or bouquets of flowers for her performances. She is instead left to consider the imminent demise of her career and, by extension, her own mortality.

*There Were No Flowers Tonight* dates from Albright's critical formative period in the late 1920s and marks an important point in the development of his magic realist style. [8] Beauty and decay would continue to fascinate the artist for the remainder of his career, as seen in works such as the modern *vanitas* subject *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* [fig. 2] and, later and perhaps most famously, in the painting he created for the 1945 Oscar-winning film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1943/44, Art Institute of Chicago). When *There Were*


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*No Flowers Tonight* was exhibited in the landmark exhibition *American Realists and Magic Realists* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, Albright observed, “I have painted . . . women whose torrid flesh folds resembled corrugated mush, lemons and imitation fur, purple glazed leaves that exuded a funeral odor . . . calla lilies that drooped from their overload of paraffin. . . . But all things, whether a bluebottle fly or red flying hair, have had their points and counterpoints.” [9]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018



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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES

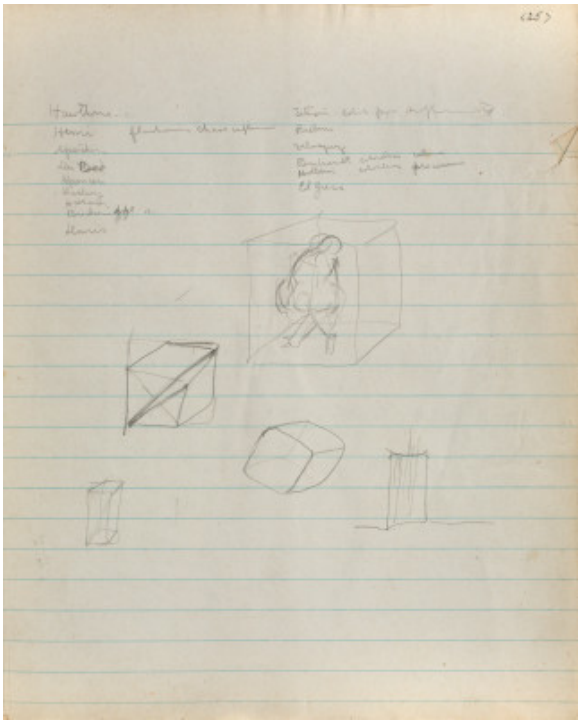

**fig. 1** Ivan Albright, Sketch for *There Were No Flowers Tonight*, Ivan Albright Archive, Notebook 7, Jan. 1929, 25, The Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago

**fig. 2** Ivan Albright, *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida*, 1929–1930, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1977.34

## NOTES

[1] The unknown author of "Did Its Beauty Cause Toledo to Ban This?" *Art Digest* 20 (Sept. 1929): 1, pointed out that *Woman* was not banished because of its modernism, and noted that the artist wondered "if the citizens of Toledo found fault with his model's peculiar and individual style of beauty." When it was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1928, Albright's *The Lineman* (1927, The Art Institute of Chicago) had been criticized as representing an "uncouth, down at the heel booze-fighter"; see "A Storm," *Art Digest* 2, no. 18 (July 1928): 1, 23.

[2] "Chicago Sets an Example in One-Man Shows," *Art Digest* 5, no. 19 (August 1931): 8.


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[3] Eleanor Jewett, “On Exhibition at Art Institute,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 23, 1931.

[4] C. H. Bonte, “In Gallery and Studio,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1930, Ivan Albright Archive, Scrapbook vol. 1, n.p.; quoted in Susan F. Rossen, ed., *Ivan Albright* (Chicago, 1997), n.p.

[5] Ivan Albright Archive, Notebook 7, Jan. 1929, 25.

[6] Teresa Carbone, in her essay “Body Language: Liberation and Restraint in Twenties Figuration,” in *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*, ed. Teresa A. Carbone (Brooklyn, 2011), 92, discusses the painting’s strange color: “an image of an aging and unattractive dancer undressing after her performance . . . showing Albright’s emulation of the Spanish baroque painter El Greco in his use of an odd, off-key palette and harsh, flickering modeling. Thoroughly mannerist in feeling, the color suggests ill health, from the purples and greens that tinge the flesh to the turquoise glow that appears to emanate from the heavily muscular arms and legs. The blackness of the shadows completes the effect, enclosing the figure and conveying an emotional weight as oppressive as the exhaustion embodied in its form.”

[7] Irwin St. John Tucker, “Skillful Contrasts Mark Art Institute Summer Exhibits,” *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Aug. 23, 1931.

[8] Michael Croydon, *Ivan Albright* (New York, 1978), 46, unaccountably objected that “the scale and composition are atypically clumsy; and the figure in spite of its convincing drawing posture, fails to compensate for these structural weaknesses.”

[9] Dorothy C. Miller and Alfred H. Barr Jr., eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists* (New York, 1943), 25.

## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher with its original tacking margins. The pre-primed fabric was coated with a commercially prepared, warm, yellowish, off-white ground. The painting was executed prior to being stretched, evidenced by original paint covering all of the tacking margins except at the top. Examination of the painting in infrared found some fine outline drawing in the area of the subject’s right eye. The artist began by blending pasty applications of light and dark paint over a well-defined drawn outline. He then used glazelike applications in transparent, acid-colored tones to accentuate the modeling. The x-radiographs show a change of


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position in the top of the sitter's head. Other than some minor areas of retouching in the upper left corner and in the background above the back of the dancer, the painting is in very good condition. The surface is coated with a glossy layer of natural resin varnish that has become discolored.

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**TECHNICAL NOTES**

[1] It is possible the fabric was hung with tape for the painting process as there are two rectangular, unpainted areas at the top of both the left and right tacking margins.

[2] Examination was done with the Mitsubishi M600 platinum silicide camera in the region of 1.5 to 2 cm.

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**PROVENANCE**

The artist [1897-1983], until at least 1947. Lawrence A. [b. 1925] and Barbara Fleischman, Detroit, at least by 1960, to 1965.[1] (Kennedy Galleries, New York); purchased 24 March 1967 by Robert H. and Clarice Smith, Washington, D.C.; gift 1972 to NGA.

[1] The artist showed the painting in exhibitions through 1947, and the painting was lent by the Fleischmans to exhibitions between 1960 and 1965.

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**EXHIBITION HISTORY**

1930 [Albright exhibition], Walden Gallery, Palmolive Building, Chicago, 1930.[1]

1931 Paintings by George and Martin Baer and Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, Art Institute of Chicago, July-October 1931, no catalogue, as Midnight.[2]

1931 Thirty-Fifth Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity, Art Institute of Chicago, January-March 1931, no. 5, repro., as Midnight.

1935 130th Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1935, no. 254, as There Were No Flowers To-nite.


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1943 American Realists and Magic Realists, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo; Minneapolis Institute of Arts; San Francisco Musuem of Art; Art Gallery of Toronto; Cleveland Museum of Art, 1943-1944, no. 27.

1945 First Joint Exhibition: The Albright Twins, Associated American Artists Galleries, New York, 1945, no. 14.

1947 121st Annual Exhibition, National Academy of Design, New York, January 1947, no. 72.

1947 The Twentieth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., March-May 1947, no. 200, repro.

1960 American Painting 1760-1960, A Selection of 125 Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, Detroit, Milwaukee Art Center, 1960, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1964 American Painting 1765-1963, Selections From the Lawrence A. and Barbara Fleischman Collection of American Art, University of Arizona Art Gallery, Tucson, 1964, no. 1, repro.

1964 Ivan Albright: A Retrospective Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1964-1965, no. 7, repro., as There Were No Flowers Tonight (Midnight).

1982 Solitude: Inner Visions in American Art, Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, 1982, no. 17, repro.

1984 Museo de los Museos: arte universal a través de los tiempos, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 1984, no. 44, repro.

1993 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Madeleine Albright, Representative of the U.S. to the United Nations, office at the U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1993-1997.

1997 Ivan Albright, Art Institute of Chicago; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997, no. 15, color repro., as There Were No Flowers Tonight (Midnight).


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2010 Against the Grain: Modernism in the Midwest, Massillon Museum, Ohio; Riffe Gallery, Columbus; Southern Ohio Museum and Cultural Center, Portsmouth; Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, 2010-2011, no. 13, repro. (shown only in Massillon, Portsmouth, and West Bend).

2011 Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties, Brooklyn Museum; Dallas Museum of Art; Cleveland Museum of Art, 2011-2012, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 68.

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**EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES**

[1] The painting, as *Midnight*, was illustrated in *Art World* (9 September 1930); the caption reads: "In Albright's current exhibition in the Walden gallery in the Palmolive building" (copy in NGA curatorial files, from the vertical files of the Library, Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery).
[2] The painting was illustrated in a review of the exhibition in *Parnassus* 3, no. 2 (February 1931): 15.

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1978 Croydon, Michael. *Ivan Albright*. New York, 1978: 46, color repro. 26.

1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 19, repro.

1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: color repro. 220, 227-228.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 20, repro.

1996 Southgate, M. Therese. "The Cover: Ivan Albright, *There Were No Flowers Tonight*." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 276, no. 15 (16 October 1996): cover, 3223, color repro.

1997 Rossen, Susan F., ed. *Ivan Albright*. Exh. cat. Art Institute of Chicago, 1997: no. 15, 26, color repro.

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