

A'Dora Phillips

The Vision & Art Project

An Interview with Dahlov Ipcar

This interview was conducted at Dahlov Ipcar's studio, Robinhood Farm, Georgetown, Maine, in July 2015, shortly after Dahlov experienced a precipitous decline in her eyesight due to macular degeneration. At the time of the interview, she was at a point of temporary crisis. After having painted for over 10 years with mild symptoms of macular degeneration, her vision had deteriorated badly in a matter of weeks. She was worried she would never paint again, though in subsequent months, she began drawing copiously and using these drawings as the basis for assisted paintings. Her son, Charlie Ipcar, was present during this interview and occasionally intervened with comments. The transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

A'DORA PHILLIPS: Have you always worked in this studio?

DAHLOV IPCAR: When I first started working here [at Robinhood Farm, in 1937], I worked in my living room, and then in an adjoining room, which had just been storage space. And then the children came along. I think I stayed in the living room until the children grew out of the lower room and moved upstairs. Then I had that room for a studio for a while, but it wasn't very big, and it got cluttered.

PHILLIPS: So you moved to different parts of the house?

IPCAR: [The exterior studio my mother had built] was too hot in the summer, and it was too cold in winter, and was too far away from the house when I had children. So it wasn't very useful. Though I did a big mural in it one summer. I did all my murals in there, I mean, all the first big ones.

Charlie said he sent you some photos of the murals. The biggest one I did is in the Shriners Children's Hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts. It's 5½ feet by 21 feet.

We [Dahlov and her husband Adolf] did it on one big stretcher, and I thought everybody could give us advice, but nobody in Maine knew how to do it. We got somebody in New York to give us the instructions over the phone, and it was really an engineering feat.



Dahlov Ipcar in front of the exterior studio her mother, Marguerite Zorach, had built, with her mural for the LaFollete, Tennessee post office.

PHILLIPS: Was it exciting to work on such a large scale?

IPCAR: I enjoyed it. The first big one I did was at the local library. It is still there. And I had always sort of in the back of my mind wanted to do something really large, just to see what it was like. I felt like you could paint a nine-foot tiger just as fast and easily as a nine-inch tiger. You just use bigger brushes.

PHILLIPS: Is that the only adaptation you made to working large?

IPCAR: Yes.

PHILLIPS: So you didn't grid off the canvas or anything like that?

IPCAR: I never gridded off anything, except when I was doing illustrations. Sometimes when I wanted to enlarge a sketch, I would grid it. No, I just did it by eye. I just went right ahead with those large scales, and I said to myself, “Well, you will either fall flat on your face, or be successful. You never know.”

PHILLIPS: Have you always painted in a studio environment? Did you ever paint outside?

IPCAR: I’ve never painted outside. I sketched once in a while. This is what my mother [Marguerite Zorach] always did, too, these little pencil sketches with color annotations.

PHILLIPS: Did you keep sketchbooks throughout your career?

IPCAR: Two sketchbooks in my whole life. Mostly I just had ideas and went ahead and painted them.

PHILLIPS: Your painting practices have probably changed a lot since you’ve gotten macular degeneration, but can you talk a bit about how you traditionally worked before you had to adapt your methods?

IPCAR: Yes, I worked on an easel. Adolf and I used to stretch the canvas, and now my son, Charlie, and I stretch the canvases. And I just figured out what size I wanted, and—

CHARLIE IPCAR: I think you generally do a charcoal sketch.

IPCAR: The only sketching thing I did in preparation for painting was to make a thumbnail sketch, which is about four by five or four by whatever size, six I guess it would be, and they’re very sketchy. You’d laugh if you saw one. But it just would be something to make me at least remember what I planned to do. And usually I just went ahead, and I decided after a certain point in my life that I really wanted just to paint animals. Jungle animals mostly. And I like the complexity of pictures with lots of things in them.

PHILLIPS: I can tell!

IPCAR: I found that I could put in a sort of cubist background. It wasn’t like a *National Geographic* panorama, which always seems so crowded with animals and things that it doesn’t seem natural. And while a cubism is not natural, it just seems right.



Dahlov Ipcar
"Harlequin Jungle"
Oil on Linen 40" X 50"
1972

PHILLIPS: It sounds like when you started a painting you'd have a sense of how big it would be. And you'd perhaps draw the design with charcoal?

IPCAR: If they were large animals, I'd draw them with charcoal, but most of the time, when they were small animals on a background, I would just draw them with a brush. I drew better with a brush than I did with the pencil. I don't draw with pencil well, and I draw all right with charcoal, but I never drew small things with charcoal. I mean, the pictures that have small animals in them, they're all just spontaneously done with a brush, without any preparation.

PHILLIPS: In looking at your work it seems to me that you're not interested in depicting a literal reality, but something beyond that.

IPCAR: You know, when I see what artists consider reality is mostly, it's a lot of drawing in it, and to me, it doesn't look very real. And my animals are maybe stylized, but to me they have more life, and they're more real, than most people's, most artist's.

PHILLIPS: I think they're quite extraordinary.

IPCAR: People always tell me, they like the action. I see their action with my mind as a guide. I like to watch movies. I don't like still photographs. And if I could see the animals themselves, I would enjoy that. There used to be a little zoo out here on the outskirts of Bath. They had leopards and other animals, and the man had a big ring where he put the leopards out there for me to watch them play. I was amazed at how gentle they were with each other. He had at least one pair of leopards, maybe more.

PHILLIPS: I understand that people are often surprised to learn that you have not really traveled that much.

IPCAR: I never traveled outside the United States, not even to Canada.

PHILLIPS: You're often referred to as a Maine painter. Does that mean anything to you?

IPCAR: Well, I'm a Maine painter only in that I live here. I don't, I mean, it's a beautiful place, and that's inspiration, but I don't paint the Maine landscape. Very rarely. And I'm not a landscape painter, mostly. Unless you consider African jungles landscapes, which I suppose they count as. But I like to just paint what's in my imagination. I think my animals are fairly real, but all of the plants are imaginary. I don't do any research on plants. I do research on animals.

PHILLIPS: What kind of research?

IPCAR: Well, I used to, when I was young, I went to the Bronx Zoo a lot, before I left New York. And that's about the only experience I've had, actually, watching exotic animals. So the movies, as I said before.

CHARLIE IPCAR: Occasionally you would go to a reference book for the colorations and for details.

IPCAR: Yeah, I have books I refer to, just for the actual details, stuff I either use or don't use, depending on how it fits in the picture.

PHILLIPS: That makes me think you must have a great memory.

IPCAR: I have good visual memory. I never studied anatomy. But I don't think you have to, to get a sense of the look of the animals.

PHILLIPS: You were born in Vermont, grew up mainly in New York City, moved to Maine as a young woman.

IPCAR: Well we came here summers from the time I was five. My school, actually, let out in May and opened in October, so we had a long summer. I went to one of the very first progressive schools in the country [Caroline Pratt's City and Country School in Greenwich Village]. It was a marvelous school. I still remember the Egyptian plays and the medieval plays. Each year you'd put on a play in your class, and make the costumes and make the scenery and write the play. That was one of the things we did. I think it was important.

PHILLIPS: Do you think that type of education provided a good foundation for continuing to be creative throughout your life?

IPCAR: I think so.

PHILLIPS: Did you send your children to a similar type of school?

IPCAR: Well, we really couldn't. I mean, there were no schools, no charter schools, no progressive schools anywhere in the neighborhood. We sent them to the local school, and Adolf got on the school board and got a newer school building built. They were, they just had two one-room schools on the island, and there were about 35 kids in each school. And one teacher for each school. And there was some protest that if it was good enough for our daddies, it should be good enough for our kids. And Adolf said, when your daddies were here, there were nine schools on this island, each one with a teacher. And that makes a big difference. Anyhow, he got a new school built, and then stayed on the school board for quite a while. He tried to get some good progressive teachers in, and the town was sort of outraged. They said he was turning it into a play school. And I think the teachers, themselves, went off to better jobs. But he did what he could. And I always thought maybe that living on a farm made up for what they didn't get in the way of progressive education.

PHILLIPS: So you would come here in the summers as a child. At what point did you move here permanently?

IPCAR: When I married, and after we stayed the first winter in New York in 1936, and we came here in 1937, the summer of 1937. We were going to just see what it was like for one winter, and we never went back.

Everything was very primitive. There was no running water, no electricity, no bathrooms. You had privies.

CHARLIE IPCAR: No central heat.

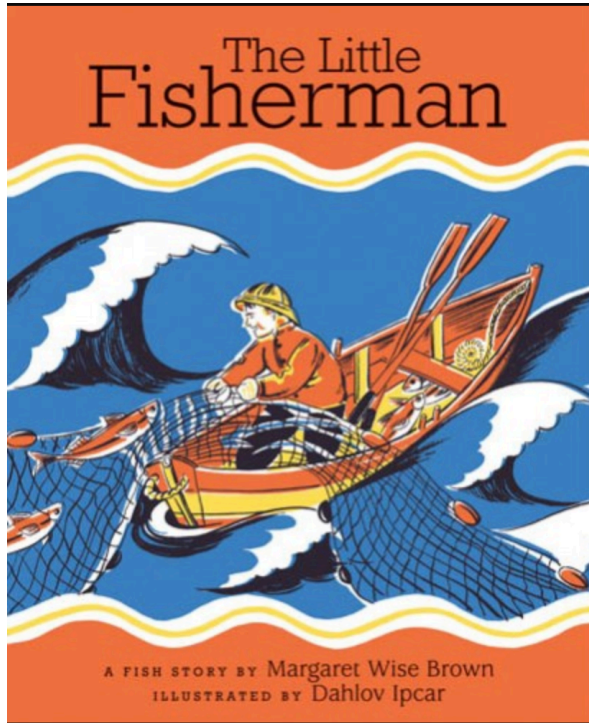
IPCAR: No central heat, no. And Adolf cut, had to cut ice for the refrigerator, for the ice box. We didn't have refrigeration. And yet you know, we didn't feel that we were suffering in any way for that. When you came to Maine in the summer, you didn't expect to have all these modern conveniences, and you adapted. So we were sort of used to it.

PHILLIPS: Do you feel like those kinds of conditions can help a person be creative or helped you to be creative?

IPCAR: I don't know that it has anything to do with creation. I think it makes for a better life. You know, this sort of natural life, natural way to live. You grew your own food, and you repaired your own machinery. If you took care of things yourself, you had horses for, it was almost 19th century, and it was, I really think it was the nicest, probably the best way of living. Although there were a lot of hardships in the 19th century, there were a lot of good ways of life.

PHILLIPS: So in addition to painting, you've written quite a bit, both children's books and young adult fiction.

IPCAR: I've got three young adult novels. I just sort of... I don't know... got an idea and started writing. And I don't have any ideas for writing anymore. That's what I need, I suppose. But I wrote three novels, and one book of short stories. Not to mention all the children's books, which I didn't consider literature, exactly. They were just, I tried to write as well as I could, though, and I tried to do as good art as I could for the children's books. I thought that was important.



Dahlov's first published illustrations were done for Margaret Wise Brown's, *The Little Fisherman*

PHILLIPS: What drove you to write?

IPCAR: I don't know. It just happened. I know how the short stories happened, because I woke up one morning and remembered what had happened to me when I was five years old in Provincetown, and I said, "gee, that's a story." And I've written it all down, and it's the first story in my book, *The Nightmare and Her Foal*. Everything in that story is accurate and true to life. Except I didn't shoot anybody.

PHILLIPS: You made it a little more dramatic, then.

IPCAR: I made it a little more dramatic. Actually, I had a real gun, found a real gun when I was five years old, and I made the child six, because I thought, nobody would believe that someone that young could harpoon fish. I harpooned these red fish, and I found this pistol. And they didn't have toy pistols in those days. You know, this is a real pistol. And I remember, I was running across the sand with it, and a man said, "You'd better take that to your daddy." And I did take it to my daddy, and he took it away with great horror. I don't know what happened to it.

PHILLIPS: Did you have a sense when you were running, before the man called to you, that you had contraband, you had something that you shouldn't?

IPCAR: Yeah, I think I did.

PHILLIPS: What is the difference between painting and writing?

IPCAR: To me, the writing was much more exciting. I'd lie awake nights, you know, writing these stories, and thinking about them, and painting just sort of seemed natural. Once in a while you'd get the excitement, but not the same kind of excitement as the writing, which is strange.

PHILLIPS: How long would you usually work on a painting?

IPCAR: Well, I did about ten a year most of the time. Then later I began working less as I got older. I'd work one or two hours a day and get much more accomplished. And that was sort of the pattern, always. I'd get up and work in the mornings for a couple of hours. And it was amazing how much you get done.

And I was always happy when I was painting. I miss it. You know? It takes a big bite out of my life.

PHILLIPS: How would you know when a painting was done?

IPCAR: Well, my rule is, when nothing you did improved it, then it was done.

PHILLIPS: And what kinds of things would you do to improve a painting during the working process?

IPCAR: Oh, you know, tidy it up and change it if it didn't fit in accurately, or didn't go with the other things. I have never used acrylics. I don't like the rubbery feel. And people say they're so fast, you know. Well, it doesn't seem to matter to me whether they dry fast or not. They tell you to wait until it dries, but I paint right into it as soon as it's just dry enough to paint over.

PHILLIPS: You've always used oil, right?

IPCAR: I have always used oil. This is what I was trying to say. And what did I do to improve things? Well, I sometimes painted things out and put things in. And you just work until you get

the best effect you can. You never get exactly what you have in your mind. Sometimes a painting changes completely. It's very interesting the way that things develop.

PHILLIPS: So it sounds like you allowed the process—

IPCAR: The process to take over. Yes. Exactly.

PHILLIPS: You allowed the process or the painting to speak to you about what it wanted to become.

IPCAR: Yeah. You can't help it. That happens with stories, too. They do what they want to do with you.

PHILLIPS: Do you have any thoughts about the power of memory and imagination for the artist?

IPCAR: I just believe my main idea for art is that you should, it should be original. It should bring something new into the world. Just copying what's out there is to me a waste of time. I mean, it's unimportant. Although sometimes you get a nice record of the past if things change a lot, by having a painting or a photograph of it. But a record, that's a different thing from something original.

PHILLIPS: How important has the influence of other artists been to you in your work?

IPCAR: I've been asked that a lot lately. And it's hard... you know. Well, I've thought about it lately, because there is a critic here in Maine who tends to try to find the roots for every artist, and he never gets much beyond the modern art movement. Everybody compares me to Rousseau. I love Rousseau, but I mean, I don't feel I'm identical with him in any way. And I don't know that I was influenced by him. But perhaps the things that did influence me were very early art, prehistoric art, even, and Egyptian art, and Chinese and Indian miniatures. These were all things I loved and they have certain things in common, bright colors and sharp details, and usually small, very elegant, small images. And Japanese art is sort of an influence. The Japanese had beautiful animal art. I don't think I've been influenced by any modern artist. I have admired a few off and on, but not very many. There are not very many that are painting what I'm doing, and maybe if they were, I'd like what they did.

All those early kinds of art were very beautiful. I remember one Roman, I very recently discovered, it was underwater, and it had beautiful African antelopes on it, on the walls, painted on the walls as murals. And that, to me, is quite astonishing. I think it was the Cretan Minoan culture, or Phoenician. You know, I'm not good on geography.

PHILLIPS: When did you start having trouble with your vision?

IPCAR: This has been coming on a long time, and I sort of watched it develop. In the beginning, it was trouble with reading mostly. It didn't seem to bother my art until just a year ago. I began to have difficulty with not being able to coordinate my hand and eye to get the details. Now it's like the fog has come in, and that makes it even harder. I mean, almost impossible. Things are in a deep fog now, and my eye doctor, whom I saw the other day, said things are much worse than he expected, and have gotten much worse than he expected they were going to be. Which is not very encouraging. I've got the dry kind of macular degeneration, which they can't do anything for.

Supposedly the dry kind is better, because it is slower. And it has been slow, but this last year it's just been rapid. I mean, it seems to me every few days, it's a little worse.

PHILLIPS: So when you say it's like there's a fog, is it how William Thon described seeing with macular degeneration—as if he were looking through wax paper?

IPCAR: Well, no, it's not like that. It's just like there's a heavy fog. You are wiped out by a fog. I can see your white shirt, and can see your arms and hands, and I can see your legs, but not much. I mean, I can just see they're there. But your face and your head are gone. And anything on that side of the room is gone. That painting is gone. It's just black over there, black fog. It's not solid black, it's just very dense, deep fogginess. And it gets into the middle of my vision when I try to paint something. My hand comes out and can't see what to do. It's impossible to do anything, because it's just a blur.

PHILLIPS: I imagine it's also hard to assess what you're doing.

IPCAR: It's hard to see what I'm painting. However, I haven't lost as much color as I thought I would. They all told me I'd lose color. And I've lost some color vision. But this is the last

painting I've been trying to paint, and it's like I got this far, and I can't finish it. It's a panther and birds.



Dahlov Ipcar
"Panther and Birds" Incomplete
Oil on Linen 23" X 36"
2015

PHILLIPS: When did you start working on this painting?

IPCAR: Oh, about a month ago. I've been working on it and trying to finish, do something, get it finished. I find it almost impossible. I was wondering if any of these artists use assistants?

PHILLIPS: Yes, they do.

IPCAR: I think that's what I may need to do. I can't imagine what I'll do if I don't keep painting.