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DAHLOV IPCAR: BIOGRAPHY

People around the country love the work of Maine artist Dahlov Ipcar, and, with a career spanning seven decades, there's a lot to treasure. Her hundreds of paintings range from realistic depictions of people working the land in Maine to bold and fanciful displays of animals in real or imagined habitats. These paintings have been in the Museum of Modern Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Her murals can be seen in a number of public buildings; her cloth sculptures, some born of legends and Greek and Roman myths, have delighted young and old alike; and her intricate tapestries and hooked rugs are marvels in their own right. Still, this prolific artist is perhaps most widely known and cherished for her books for children.

Starting in 1945 when she illustrated *The Little Fisherman*, written by Margaret Wise Brown, Dahlov brought her unique style to children's literature, treating each illustration as if it were a masterpiece. "When I write and illustrate for children, I feel a strong obligation to do my best," Dahlov has said. And she did indeed do her best on each of the more than thirty children's books that bear her name.

Dahlov, who has lived in Georgetown, on Maine's midcoast for more than seventy years, was born in Vermont on Nov. 12, 1917. As the daughter of William and Marguerite Zorach, art was at the center of her world. Her parents, both renowned artists – he painted and sculpted, she painted and created elaborate tapestries – surrounded Dahlov and her older brother, Tessim, with art, talk of art, and creative freedom. When Dahlov was very young, the family moved to Greenwich Village, New York, to what was considered a "dreadful neighborhood where I wasn't allowed to play with the street kids," she remembers. But the Zorach home "was exciting and different from other people's homes," she said in a 2001 interview. "I could not have imagined a life without paintings on the walls, and color everywhere."

From the age of three, Dahlov attended the experimental City and Country School, which eschewed traditional education as anathema to children's natural curiosity. There she studied the history, culture and art of ancient civilizations; acted in plays; and wrote stories and poems. Outside of school she and her father regularly visited studios, galleries, and museums, especially The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where she was struck by the form, color, and design of ancient art in particular. And she began to paint. Scenes of exotic animals in places she'd never seen were often the subjects of her earliest work. "From the beginning I have always done almost all my work from imagination," she says. She made her first art sale at the age of sixteen, selling one of her paintings for \$250 to a friend of her mother. "But I didn't make that much money again for one of my paintings for a long time," she says.

Dahlov spent summers at the family's 1820 farmhouse on Robinhood Cove in Georgetown, Maine. Her mother decorated the walls of the home with murals that are still vibrant today, and her father turned an old shed into a studio. The family also did some small-scale farming and Dahlov and her brother were put to work weeding vegetable



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gardens and haying. Dahlov reveled in the natural beauty that surrounded her Maine summer home and took great pleasure in the family's farm animals and many household pets, as well as the wild creatures she often came upon in the woods and along the shore.

In the summer of 1932, when she was fourteen, Dahlov met the man who was to become her husband. Adolph Ipcar, twenty-seven, a teacher, was vacationing at the house next door with his sisters and did some work around the farm for the Zorachs. In spite of their age difference, the two became friends, and renewed their friendship every summer thereafter.

Dahlov attended two progressive high schools, Walden and Lincoln School Teachers College of New York City, where she continued her study of art. Upon graduating in 1934, she set off for Oberlin College in Ohio on a full scholarship but left after only a year, dissatisfied with conventional academics and what she viewed as an old-fashioned art department. She spent the next year at home and in the fall of 1936, she and Adolph were married. Their marriage would last for sixty-seven years until Adolph's death at ninety-eight in 2003.

As newlyweds back in New York City, the couple worked as teachers and Dahlov continued to paint. She also tried to sell some illustrated stories, but was unsuccessful. The couple was barely making ends meet. But that summer when they went to Maine, an opportunity presented itself that would prove to be beneficial not only to their finances, but would set their course for the future. Upon learning that the Zorachs' hired hand had quit, the couple moved into his house next to the farmhouse. Soon thereafter, they decided that Adolph would take the hired-hand job and they'd live in Maine year-round. They decided to try it for a year and see how it went, and they never left. Dahlov lives in the "hired hand's" house to this day.

The Ipcars built up the farm, and kept themselves busy milking cows, raising poultry and pigs, working the fields with a horse-drawn plow, cutting wood, and harvesting ice. Dahlov's 1950 children's book *One Horse Farm* is based upon their life during this time. In 1939, the couple's first son, Robert, was born, followed by Charles in 1942. As her parents did before her, Dahlov surrounded her children with art. "I have long felt that a child raised without art is as surely deprived as a child raised without love," she said, writing in the catalogue that accompanied the Portland Museum of Art's 2001-2 retrospective of her work.

In spite of the farm chores and raising two sons, Dahlov always found time to paint, mostly farm scenes and portraits. "We farmed, I painted, I worked on my books, and then we went to bed. When you get up at five in the morning, you get a lot done," she says. Still, the couple was far from financially secure.

In 1945, publisher William R. Scott, looking for new illustrators, heard about Dahlov from someone at the City and Country School. He asked her if she'd be interested in illustrating a new book, *The Little Fisherman*, by Margaret Wise Brown, the famed children's author who would go on to write more than one hundred children's books, including the classics, *Goodnight Moon* and *Runaway Bunny*.



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Dahlov did a sample spread which the publisher loved. Her illustrations were accepted and she received a \$400 one-time fee for her work, a windfall for her and her family.

The Little Fisherman was well-received, and Dahlov's stylistic illustrations were critically acclaimed. She illustrated two more books for W.R. Scott, but, inspired by Brown's writing, Dahlov started off on her own writing career. "I carefully picked each word, and recognized the importance of their rhythm," she says. She wrote and illustrated *Animal Hide and Seek*, and it was published in 1947. Over the next forty years, she would write and illustrate thirty more books for children. *One Horse Farm* (1950), *The Wonderful Egg* (1958), *Lobsterman* (1962), *The Cat at Night* (1969), *The Marvelous Merry-go-Round* (1970), *The Cat Came Back* (1971), and her most recent *My Wonderful Christmas Tree* (1986) are just a few books that have become beloved classics.

"I've raised a whole generation of people in Maine on my children's books," she says.

Ipcar's sons were often her inspiration. They'd ask her to draw something special for them – a horse, say, or a dinosaur – and she would, and a story would be born. Always, she adhered to her own self-imposed guidelines when writing. A student once asked her what made a good quality children's book. "Originality, imagination, opening children's eyes to new experiences," she replied. Good content makes use of "poetic images and writing that will stir the soul." On the other hand, she replied, "Trite, commonplace, dull, didactic, saccharine, sentimental are qualities of a poor book."

Of her own, she doesn't have a favorite. "It's rather like having children," she said once in an interview. "You can't decide which is a favorite. You love them all equally. You see something unique in each one. You love each one."

Dahlov, in her nineties, still paints every day even though she has had surgery on both hands for carpal tunnel. "It's hard to stop when it's something you enjoy," she says. "I wonder if I'll ever stop. Maybe if I feel that I'm not any good," she laughs. Her paintings, as large, colorful and fantastical as ever, are still in demand, and fetch hefty prices. A gallery show in 2007 in Portland, Maine, was a raging success, with one reporter likening it to a reception for a "rock star." She continues to hold a show of new paintings at a gallery in Freeport, Maine, every other year.

Dahlov is proud of her work, her books, her life. "Everything I touch turns to silver and gold," she says. "Other people complain about the way their life has turned out, but not me."

-By Amy Canfield