

Zwara, John (ca. 1880s-ca. 1940s) Water-colorist and artist. Known as the “mystery artist of Indianapolis,” Zwara was born in Austria in the 1880s. Having attended art schools in Prague and Berlin, he left Austria for the United States in 1900. Zwara spoke little English and had trouble communicating with others. Before coming to Indianapolis in the 1930s, he lived as a vagabond wandering across the country.

Zwara had no family and few friends in Indianapolis. Sleeping on the streets and subsisting on a diet of bread and coffee, he earned a living by selling his paintings to Lyman and Brothers and H. Lieber Company in Indianapolis. Alexander Vonnegut, who eventually befriended Zwara, recognized his remarkable talent with watercolors, but also realized that he had mental problems and had him committed in 1936 to Central State Hospital. At the hospital, physicians diagnosed Zwara as a schizophrenic but allowed him to paint. Zwara stayed only six months at the institution and then left. He died in the 1940s at the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Zwara was a prolific painter, reportedly producing ten paintings a week. He worked mainly in watercolors, painting landscapes, but occasionally produced an oil portrait or landscape. The Indiana Medical History Museum has one of the largest collections of his paintings.

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