

JAMES ENSOR  
WILDEST  
DREAMS

BEYOND IMPRESSIONISM

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# FOREWORD

Dear reader,

We should begin by paying credit where credit is due: it was Kaat Debo, director of MoMu, who first came up with the idea of making 2024 an 'Ensor Year'. This is, after all, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the artist's death.

Several Antwerp institutions – the fashion museum (MoMu), the photography museum (FOMU), the Plantin-Moretus Museum/Print Room and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) – immediately put their heads together to explore James Ensor's work from a variety of angles. The embryonic idea was then presented to EventFlanders. The Antwerp museums were firmly committed to a project that would resonate internationally and so, with the prompting of EventFlanders, Ostend too was drawn into the commemorative year. News of the two cities' plans was then picked up in Brussels, which likewise hitched its wagon to the train. 'Ensor Year 2024' was now a fact.

Beginning with a spring prelude in Ostend, followed by an intermezzo in Brussels, the apotheosis now occurs in Antwerp, with four top exhibitions in a single city.

KMSKA is treating visitors to a whirlwind of an exhibition, with the title *In Your Wildest Dreams – Ensor Beyond Impressionism*. The event is the culmination of the many years of research that the museum has invested in its Ensor collection.

During the years in which KMSKA was closed for large-scale refurbishment and expansion, we organised Ensor exhibitions all over the world, significantly raising the international profile of the artist and his work. The present exhibition adds a further layer by presenting the accumulated knowledge in a broader perspective.

We are especially indebted for the steadily growing body of research into our Ensor collection to the former KMSKA curators and directors Walther Vanbeselaere, Marcel de Maeyer and Lydia Schoonbaert. The last few years have been devoted entirely to deepening this knowledge. Museums are better placed than any other institutions to apply the latest technical art history and conservation science on the broadest possible scale. They are the custodians, after all, of

the objects of research – paintings, drawings, images and so forth – and possess the art historical expertise, the infrastructure and the know-how to inform the public and trigger its interest in new scientific findings and insights. The Ensor Research Project was set up in 2013 to perform a critical examination of Ensor's creative process. KMSKA curator Herwig Todts immediately got his teeth into this groundbreaking research, with Annelies Rios-Casier bolstering the team as a young researcher from the University of Antwerp.

In collaboration with the university's AXIS research group, Ensor's painting style has been documented step by step on the basis of precise physical and technical data. KMSKA's paintings collection formed the core of the research, but works by Ensor in other museums – including Mu.ZEE in Ostend, the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent (MSKG), the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (KMSKB-MRBAB) in Brussels and a number of private collections – have been (and will be) examined by X-ray, infrared, ultraviolet and MA-XRF imaging. This research is being carried out in parallel with more traditional art historical techniques. The Ensor Research Project allows a fresh approach to Ensor and his work, which in turn provides the impetus for the exhibition *In Your Wildest Dreams: Ensor Beyond Impressionism*. It is only natural when we come face-to-face with works such as *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* from the Art Institute of Chicago or *The Intrigue* from KMSKA's own collection, to wonder who precisely was the man behind these disconcerting images. Ensor's art has been co-opted all too often to illustrate the story of a tormented, eccentric loner.

The focus of this book and of the exhibition, by contrast, is firmly on the artist's creative trajectory, which immediately results in several corrections to Ensor's standard biography. This was a highly knowledgeable and ambitious artist who was eager to compete with his European contemporaries, and who became one of those late nineteenth-century gamechangers himself: a forerunner of twentieth-century art; an artist who

took great pleasure in breaking the artistic rules, but who from time to time also rewrote those same rules. It was Ensor, after all, who discovered that the caricatural distortions of popular carnival masks could become an instrument of an Expressionist *unmasking*. Yet it was his unorthodox relationship with established museum art, his European contemporaries, unknown Old Masters, exotic models, contemporary popular culture and cartoons, as well as his literary and musical compositions and his public appearances, which made him even more the kind of artist we know today.

The exhibition presents – often for the first time – works by Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Emil Nolde, Auguste Renoir and Edvard Munch alongside those of Ensor, not to mention paintings by all sorts of lesser-known artists, including Eugène Laermans, Henry De Groux, Ernst Josephson and Witold Wojtkiewicz.

Our warmest gratitude is due to all the lenders who have helped make this fascinating story possible. It goes without saying that the entire KMSKA team also deserves immense praise for keeping everything on track. We would especially like to thank Herwig Todts, whose incisive research has placed not only James Ensor but KMSKA as a whole on the international map.

We hope that visitors will discover a new, surprising and different James Ensor in this book and in this exceptional exhibition, both of which are fully committed to knowledge *and* experience, to facts *and* emotion, with no hint of contradiction between them: just as it was, perhaps, in the mind of James Ensor.

Happy reading!

Luk Lemmens,  
KMSKA chairman

Carmen Willems,  
KMSKA managing director

pp. 8–9: DETAIL OF FIG. 19  
James Ensor,  
*The Astonishment of  
the Mask Wouse*, 1889







# Ensor's Art in a New Perspective

Herwig Todts

Eugène Demolder (1862–1919) recognised as early as 1892 that diversity and variation were more important to Ensor than specialisation, prompting the artist, as it were, to try out all manner of genres: dreamy seascapes, still lifes, ‘a series of stylish ladies’, ‘naturalistic studies that are a touch primitive’, alongside comical subjects, masks, crowds, pure caricatures and jocular ‘diableries’.<sup>1</sup> It was likewise Demolder – lawyer, author, son-in-law of Félicien Rops and the artist’s close friend – who organised Ensor’s first solo exhibition in 1894, while the twenty-four-page brochure he published in 1892 was the first in-depth study devoted to the Ostend painter and remains a valuable source for understanding his work.

Art historians, critics and enthusiasts have a tendency, of course, to reduce the activity of artists to the essentials, as a result of which they can easily lose sight of its varied character. From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, galleries and museums became the primary destination for works of art rather than religious buildings or the palaces of aristocrats and governments. At the exhibitions held at these new venues, artists increasingly set about distinguishing themselves from one another through their choice of subject, design, and material and technical execution. In this way, artistic production has grown considerably more diverse over the past two hundred years. Even against this backdrop, however, we can only conclude that Ensor’s activity was exceptionally versatile. As Demolder noted, Ensor the visual artist was not a specialist: whether as a painter, draughtsman or etcher, he explored a variety of subjects in a range of styles and techniques. From 1884 onwards, moreover, he also published journalistic articles and wrote art-critical satire and speeches. He was also known as an unorthodox musician: Ensor’s flute was always in his pocket and in 1883 he was already amusing his friends with his imitations of Wagner on the piano.<sup>2</sup> He composed the light-hearted ballet *La Gamme d’amour* in 1911,

complete with scenario, keyboard music, costumes and stage sets. In 1892, together with his young friend Ernest Rousseau Jr, he performed in the dunes in a mini-phonovella about travellers lost in the desert; and in 1931, he, Léon Spilliaert and Félix Labisse actually appeared in Henri Storck’s short film *Idylle sur le sable*. We might well call *My Favourite Room* (1892) an allegory of Ensor’s notion of artistic practice.<sup>3</sup>

How and why did Ensor’s virtually post-Modern versatility come about? His biography is regularly invoked as the only significant motivation for his surprising artistic journey, but this has resulted in a misleading view of his art. Following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Fraenger, there is a tendency to identify ‘psychograms’ all over the place.<sup>4</sup>

James was the son of a Belgian mother and an English father, James Frederic Ensor,<sup>5</sup> who studied medicine in Heidelberg for at least a year. The remainder of his library in the archives of Mu.ZEE in Ostend testifies to his broad intellectual interests. The artist’s father came from a prominent and wealthy family who were frequent visitors to both the Belgian capital and coast. It was during the second half of the nineteenth century that Ostend, with its modest fortress and harbour installed under Austrian rule, was transformed on the initiative of the Belgian government, the city council and the king into the fashionable ‘Queen of Belgian Resorts’. By 1900, Europe’s *beau monde* came together at the town’s esplanade, Kursaal, Wellington race track and expensive hotels.<sup>6</sup> Emile Verhaeren described Ostend as ‘the loveliest of these temporary capitals of decked-out vice and jaded luxury’.<sup>7</sup> Ensor’s father might have been among that early cohort of resort-goers. At any rate, having married the modest Ostend girl Catharina Haegheman, James Frederic settled in the town, where the couple ran the souvenir and curiosity shop established by her parents. The business, in Ensor Sr’s name, failed in 1875, but the family had better luck with a new gift shop for tourists. They also rented

FIG. 1  
James Ensor,  
*My Portrait with  
Masks*, 1936,  
oil on panel,  
29.5 × 26.5 cm,  
private collection



FIG. 2  
James Ensor,  
*My Favourite Room*,  
1892, oil on canvas,  
80 × 100 cm, Tel Aviv  
Museum of Art

FIG. 3  
James Ensor,  
*Sloth*, 1888–1889,  
chalk and pencil on  
paper, 22 × 29.5 cm,  
private collection

rooms to summer visitors, occasionally including friends and acquaintances of the artist. The latter – born James Sydney Ensor in 1860 – was expected to do his fair share for the family business, in the summer season in particular, and all the more so after the death of his father left him the '*chef de la branche de la famille Ensor habitant Ostende*'.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, therefore, Ensor was a highly versatile yet essentially part-time artist throughout his life.<sup>9</sup>

His father never achieved a social position commensurate with his privileged background and was rumoured to have turned to drink, earning him the contempt of his wife and her family and making him the laughing stock of Ostend nightlife. Ensor Sr is all but absent from the letters that James and his younger sister Marie or Mitche (Mietje) wrote to their friends, the Rousseau family in Brussels, merely sending them his regards once in a while. By the beginning of 1885, he had become a wandering drunk, whom the police found in the street one day, badly beaten by local louts. It is hard to determine to what extent he was still really part of the family at that point. Ensor wrote that same year that he had bumped into his father, who sent his best wishes. James Frederic was occasionally admitted to hospital and was eventually found dead in an Ostend street on 13 April 1887.<sup>10</sup> Some historians point to the year in which Ensor's father died as crucial

to the development of his art.<sup>11</sup> As we will see, Ensor actually changed his artistic course in 1886, shortly after the third Salon of Les XX, at which he thoroughly familiarised himself with the work of the French Impressionist Claude Monet and that of the arch-Symbolist Odilon Redon. The letters that James and Mitche had been sending to the Rousseaus since 1883 also paint a different picture of the relationship between the Ensors. Aside from their father's woes and recurring complaints about the health of their mother, the latter's sister his aunt Mimi, Mitche and James himself, they appear to have been a close family. Mitche wrote with interest about the paintings and drawings her brother was working on, and in January 1888, on the eve of the fifth Salon of Les XX, Mimi helped her nephew prepare his large drawing, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, for the exhibition. The three women also sat regularly for his drawings and paintings. It was only in the 1890s, when Ensor's sister left her husband, Alfred John Taen Hee Tseu, and moved back in with her mother and brother, bringing her daughter Alexandrine with her, that Ensor began to express annoyance at the squabbling of his housemates and the behaviour of his niece. The question arises, therefore, as to whether or not relations within the family had a decisive influence on the artistic choices made by Ensor.<sup>12</sup>



Ensor attended primary school in Ostend, but he stated in his 1935 radio interview with Karel Jonckheere that in 1873 his father had sent him to the Ostend artists Michel van Cuyck (1797–1875) and Edouard Dubar (1803–1879) to learn how to paint.<sup>13</sup> In 1876, his parents moved to a rented house on the corner of Vlaanderenstraat and what is now Van Iseghemlaan, where Ensor would live until taking up residence in 1917 in the house he inherited from his uncle Léopold Haegheman (the current Ensor House). In the spring and summer of 1876, he painted dozens of small nature studies, to which he remained very attached and which he carefully preserved. Contrary to what is still claimed, he did not execute them on surplus packaging material from the shop,<sup>14</sup> but worked instead on prepared cardboard – available in a variety of standard sizes and widely used by outdoor painters at the time.<sup>15</sup> We do not know how he made the acquaintance of modern pleinairism or realism – the idea that art can and should be nothing more than the representation of a visual experience – but this was also a prominent movement in Belgium. To develop a mode of painting that shows nothing more nor less than reality, avant-garde artists in Belgium took their lightweight painting gear and tubes of paint and headed for the coast, often by train, to capture their love for the incessantly shifting beauty of the everyday: the dunes, the beach, the sea and the sky. There is a tendency, incidentally, to overstate the quality of Ensor's youthful works. While his sensitivity to light and colour is apparent from the outset and his designs are frequently touching, they remain schoolish and somewhat clumsy.<sup>16</sup>



Ensor attended the Brussels Academy between 1877 and 1880, an institution that enjoyed a much more solid reputation than the equivalent colleges in nearby Bruges and Ghent, or the academy in Antwerp – the self-proclaimed ‘metropolis of commerce and arts’. Ensor's fellow students in the capital included Fernand Khnopff, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Willy Finch and other future members of the avant-garde. He also met the poet and art critic Théo Hannon there and the latter's sister, the self-taught physicist Mariette Hannon, who married Ernest Rousseau, a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.<sup>17</sup>



Having completed his studies, Ensor began work in 1880 in his studio in the attic of his parental home in Ostend where, for the first few years, he was occasionally joined by his colleagues Willy Finch, Guillaume Van Strydonck and Théo Van Rysselberghe. Although he would live in Ostend until his death in 1949, the artist spent several days and often several weeks in Brussels almost every year, where he played an active part in the capital's cultural and fashionable life. From time to time, he thought of moving to Brussels for good, as did his mother and sister. Ostend's rail link was one of the better ones in the country, and with the exception of the odd trip to Amsterdam and Zeeland (1883 and 1895), Paris (1884, 1885, 1889), Lille (1885) and London (1892), Ensor never got further than occasional plans to visit Spain or Italy.<sup>18</sup>

FIG. 4  
Willy Finch,  
*Ostend Fisherman*,  
1880, black chalk on  
paper, 70 x 60 cm,  
Musée des Beaux-  
Arts, Tournai

FIG. 5  
James Ensor,  
*Ostend Fisherman*,  
1880, black chalk on  
paper, 70 x 60 cm,  
private collection

The Belgian art world was thoroughly modernised in the final decades of the nineteenth century, following the example of France. Art lovers, critics and collectors had previously been obliged to wait for the big summer exhibitions in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent to discover new talents and artistic trends. These neutrally conceived, three-yearly shows continued to be held for many years, but they steadily ceded their importance to the smaller, more exclusive exhibitions that artists and their champions organised themselves from the 1870s onwards. The foundation of the Société libre des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1868 was followed by the creation of a whole series of new artists' societies in quick succession. Les XX (1883–1893) gave Belgium one of the leading European avant-garde forums, while in 1893, Octave Maus founded La Libre Esthétique, an exhibition association run by himself rather than by artists. Starting in 1912, Galerie Georges Giroux in Brussels followed the example set by Les XX and La Libre Esthétique by promoting the avant-garde in the shape of temporary exhibitions, accompanied by publications, lectures and concerts.

We know from Ensor's letters, notes, articles and memoirs, and from the reminiscences and testimony of his friends and detractors, that he laid claim to a unique place at the heart of the Belgian avant-garde right from the beginning. He made his debut in 1881 at the progressive Brussels arts association, La Chrysalide, and was swiftly and universally acknowledged as one of its leading lights. The critic Gustave Lagye mocked him in 1884 as 'the giant of Les XX, the Rubens of modernity, the leader of our neo-painters... an innovator who alters the way things are seen and places them in a hitherto unsuspected light! With his strong hand he brutalises the beauty of yesteryear... dishonours it, blackens it, drives it out of the bosom of the Academy.... Bravo Ensor! Ensor forever! To him, nothing is small. His clumsiness is gigantic....'<sup>19</sup>

In his article, Lagye described the still life with *Chinoiseries* as 'accessories to express the trifles of our time'<sup>20</sup> and mentioned *A Colourist*, *The Lady in Distress*, *The Drunkards*, *The Masks* ('modern travesty... sublime horrors of the grand modernity')<sup>21</sup> and, as the 'apotheosis', *The Lamp-Lighter*, which he summed up in the following terms: 'Hosanna! Christ has risen! This lamp-lighter is the light bearer of the future. Monsieur Ensor has birthed him, not without pain, and the late Manet, invited to be the godfather, sent his imprimatur from his final resting place.'<sup>22</sup> Ensor posted a handwritten copy of the article to his Brussels friends, adding the note, 'this colossal stupidity will delight you'.<sup>23</sup> In August, a few months later, he published a first satire on the world of art in *L'Art moderne*, with the title '*Trois semaines à l'académie. Monologue à tiroirs*' [Three weeks at the academy. An episodic monologue]. The article poked fun at academic teaching, the classical ideal of beauty and the incompetence of the professors, while hinting at his preference for pleinairism: 'Are you doing landscapes? Landscapes are a joke!'<sup>24</sup>

La Chrysalide was disbanded after the exhibition in 1881 but several former students of the Brussels Academy also showed their work at the exhibitions organised by L'Essor. The works that Ensor and several other young artists wanted to show at the official Triennial Fine Arts Salons were repeatedly rejected, and so, in 1883, he and several of his supporters quit L'Essor, which they felt was far too conservative, and founded the society Les XX ('Les Vingt' or 'The Twenty'). They asked the lawyer Octave Maus (1856–1919) – editor of the prominent avant-garde journal *L'Art moderne* (1881–1914) – to act as the group's secretary. Les XX organised ten exhibitions between 1884 and 1893, at which members showed their work alongside guest artists from Belgium and abroad. So it was that the country made the acquaintance, in rapid succession, of the French Impressionists Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, the Symbolism of Odilon Redon, Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh, and the neo-Impressionism of Georges Seurat, which was taken up enthusiastically in Belgium by Willy Finch, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Henry Van de Velde, Georges Morren and Georges Lemmen.<sup>25</sup>

Ensor, like all modern artists, was the creator of what Oskar Bätschmann has termed 'exhibition art'.<sup>26</sup> The works that drew the critical ire of Gustave Lagye in 1884, for instance, had been made with a specific view to public display. On 11 February 1883, Ensor's sister Mitche wrote to Mariette Rousseau asking her to stop sending flowers, as her brother enjoyed painting them so much that he was neglecting 'the big painting for the exhibition at the Cercle [artistique de Bruxelles]'. The work in question turned out a few weeks later to be a treatment of '*des Pochards Schnikqueux Scandalisés*'. The importance of hard liquor like the northern French *schnick* to ordinary people's lives was central to the two paintings that Ensor showed at the first exhibition of Les XX: *The Masks* – later called *The Scandalized Masks* (although 'Scandalous' would be a more appropriate adjective) – and *The Drunkards*. In iconographical terms, both works are in keeping with the popular trend in those years of depicting working-class people full length in paintings of a size and gravity that could vie with established history painting – Demolder's previously quoted '*naturalisme [...] un peu sauvage*'. One of the most important exponents of this pictorial variant of literary naturalism was Jean-François Raffaëlli, who was also known in Belgium and was even a candidate to join Les XX in around 1888.<sup>27</sup> The similarity between Ensor's *Drunkards* and Raffaëlli's 1881 work *The Absinthe Drinkers (Les déclassés)*, seems more than coincidental.<sup>28</sup> In the early years of his career, however, Ensor's views on still life and seascape, as well as his pictorial technique itself, were closer to the art of Gustave Courbet. By October 1885, when Ensor saw *After Dinner in Ornans* (1849) first hand at the museum in Lille, Courbet had already been the hero of the Belgian avant-garde, of artists such as Louis Dubois, Périclès Pantazis and Edouard Agneessens (whom Ensor would continue to venerate until his old

age) for over thirty years.<sup>29</sup> He wrote enthusiastically to his friend Dario de Regoyos as well as to Ernest and Mariette Rousseau: 'I just returned from Lille. I saw the museum. It astonished me. There are magnificent landscapes there by Jordaens. Courbet stupefied me, his *After Dinner in Ornans* is a masterpiece – no exaggeration – worthy of Rembrandt. Millet and Corot pale in comparison. They are a million miles away from Courbet. Speaking of Courbet, I do not want to see any more Courbets at Brussels art dealers. The scoundrels shamelessly make them themselves and the poor painter simply has to put up with it. I am glad to have seen him in Lille. I know him well now. He was a great artist.'<sup>30</sup>

All the same, it was with Edouard Manet, the revolutionary *par excellence*, that Gustave Lagye associated the 'offensive' paintings exhibited by Ensor. For many years, Manet remained the point of reference for anyone seeking to understand the revolutionary character of Ensor's debut. So much so that Emile Verhaeren found it necessary in 1908 to proclaim the originality of Ensor's art compared to that of Manet. Furthermore, he declared, *The Oyster Eater* of 1882 was the first 'bright' (i.e. Impressionist) painting in Belgium and confirmed Ensor's independent position.<sup>31</sup> The artist painted it in the spring of 1882 and submitted it, together with a still life and the as-yet unidentified *In the Land of Colour* to the triennial exhibition in Antwerp. But the jury rejected the work, prompting Ensor to protest vainly to its members: 'Gentlemen, you were wrong to refuse *The Oyster Eater*. It is not too late to put this right. I am counting on your impartiality!'<sup>32</sup> According to Ensor, the painting was also subsequently rejected by his colleagues at L'Essor. It was eventually canonised in 1908 after it was proposed that the work be acquired for the museum in Liège, even though the city council decided after several months of deliberation not to buy it. The painting was then purchased by the Antwerp collectors Albin and Emma Lambotte. They hoped to see it hanging in the Louvre one day, but they were later obliged to sell it, along with a substantial proportion of their Ensor collection, to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1927.<sup>33</sup>

As an up-and-coming member of the avant-garde, Ensor numbered himself among '*les impressionnistes*' and '*la jeune école*', terms he used in a draft of a letter to 'C. W.' (Cher Willy [Finch]?) concerning the first exhibition in which Ensor would participate at La Chrysalide. He submitted *Un Salon (Impression)* – later titled *The Bourgeois Salon* in 1881 – for the exhibition.<sup>34</sup> In October 1884, in the months leading up to the second Salon of Les XX, both Willy Finch and Ensor wrote to Octave Maus, the group's secretary, that they were firmly opposed to inviting the established artists Alfred Verwee and Alfred Stevens to show at the 1885 exhibition. At the same time, they insisted that a number of Impressionists be invited, suggesting Degas, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Caillebotte and Forain.<sup>35</sup> The slightly older, progressive portrait painter Isidore Verheyden showed his *Portrait of James Ensor* at the third Salon of Les XX. Ensor – whom friend and foe



FIG. 6  
Isidore Verheyden,  
*Portrait of James  
Ensor*, 1886, oil on  
canvas, 154 × 86 cm,  
collection Mu.ZEE –  
City of Ostend

FIG. 7  
James Ensor,  
*Ensor at his Easel*,  
1890?, oil on canvas,  
59.5 × 41 cm, Royal  
Museum of Fine Arts  
Antwerp – Flemish  
Community Collection



alike considered to be Belgium's most important Impressionist – submitted no fewer than twenty works. He mainly, though not exclusively, selected works from 1881 and 1882: scenes from the lives of stylish young *bourgeoises*, including the famous *Oyster Eater*, five still lifes, five city and sea views and an unidentified naturalistic *Design for a Decorative Frieze for the Court of Assizes: 'Les Misérables'*. Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir were both represented at the exhibition with a broad selection of their work. The critic Louis Solvay defended the art of the Belgian Impressionists, while simultaneously confirming the still somewhat traditional character of Belgian pleinairism: 'While Manet and his followers sought the truth of the effect more in the extremes and intensity of light, here we see Monsieur Ensor and others succeed chiefly in a calmer annotation... our own are better able to take account of everything in the atmosphere that lends tonality its harmony and value.'<sup>36</sup> All the same, French Impressionism had an overwhelming impact on art in Belgium, even if it attracted the rather misleading label of 'luminism'.<sup>37</sup>

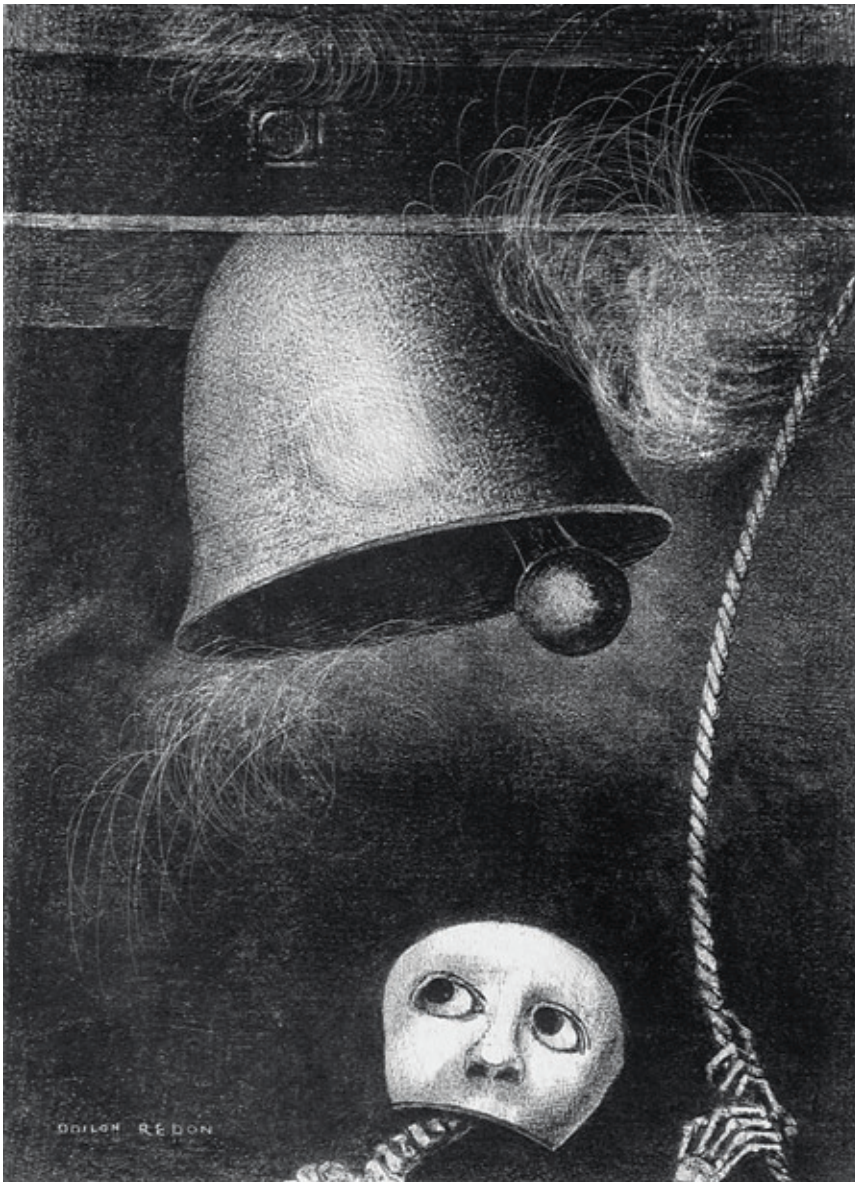
It is not easy to track Ensor's painted output in 1886. On 17 April, he wrote to his friends in Brussels: 'I am numb and utterly exhausted from painting.... It absorbs me absolutely and does not allow me a moment's rest. It is a constant torment. I work at least nine hours a day.

When I am finished, I am tired and good for nothing... the latest paintings are not bad.' He added that he had painted two seascapes and a self-portrait. (Might the latter have been *Ensor at His Easel*, the self-portrait customarily dated 1890?)<sup>38</sup> In the handwritten '*liste de mes œuvres*' that Ensor provided to Emile Verhaeren in 1908, he made no mention of seascapes or a self-portrait, but he did list eight other titles: *Etudes de Lumière* (possibly the umbrella title that Ensor liked to use after 1900), several still lifes, *Skeleton and Pierrots* (as yet unidentified) and *Children at Their Morning Toilet*.<sup>39</sup> We do not know whether the latter had been completed by the end of 1886 – he overpainted the basin in which one of the children washes their feet – but the artist did not exhibit the work until 1888. He was fully occupied in 1886 by several very large drawings that were entirely in line, in terms of both composition and style, with the art of Rembrandt. The influence of the latter's heavily impastoed realism was already visible, of course, in early works by Ensor, including the 1883 *Self-Portrait*, to which he added a flowered hat in 1888. Ensor also studied how Rembrandt characterised the figures in his etchings as well as the exotic costumes in *Judas Flinging the Pieces of Silver into the Temple* (1880 and again in 1891). He borrowed other drawings and etchings

FIG. 8  
Rembrandt van Rijn,  
*Christ Healing the Sick*  
(the 'Hundred Guilder  
Print'), 1647–1649,  
etching on paper,  
27.8 × 38.8 cm,  
Royal Library of  
Belgium, Brussels

FIG. 9  
Odilon Redon,  
*To Edgar Allan Poe:*  
*A Mask Sounds*  
*the Death Knell*,  
1882, lithograph,  
44 × 30.5 cm,  
Royal Library of  
Belgium, Brussels





from Rembrandt too. But the most striking and fundamental aspect that Ensor drew from his illustrious predecessor was his use of overwhelming and dramatic light, which simultaneously alternates with mysterious shadow contrasts. In his influential 1926 article '*James Ensor. Die Kathedrale*', Wilhelm Fraenger described the way the artist captured light in a tangle of hatching that shapes and models as 'a tissue of light' ('*ein Lichtgewebe*').<sup>40</sup> It might only have been in the course of the year that Ensor decided to exhibit five drawings and a grisaille under the collective title *Visions: The Aureoles of Christ or the Sensibilities of Light*.

Given Ensor's interest in the Impressionism of Monet and Renoir, the achievement of this astonishing series of large drawings came entirely out of the blue. A key to understanding them is nevertheless found in the catalogue for the exhibition at Les XX in February 1886. As far as *L'Art moderne* – mouthpiece of the Belgian avant-garde – was concerned, neither Monet nor Renoir, but Odilon Redon was held out as 'the most contested foreign artist at the exhibition'.<sup>41</sup> Redon showed his famous jet-black lithographs and drawings at Les XX and, like his French counterpart, Ensor too conceived his black-and-white works as a series, to which he likewise gave the title '*Visions*'. He also took inspiration from the stories of Poe and the etchings of Goya, once again like Redon. At first sight, the French Symbolist's art seems far removed from Ensor's, yet it was clearly under Redon's influence that the Ostender decided to abandon the representation of reality as the ultimate goal of visual art once and for all.<sup>42</sup>

Oddly enough, most Ensor experts have never explicitly considered what philosophical and ideological views were held by the author of an entire series of ambitious religious compositions. Ensor's father was buried in the Anglican church in Ostend, but the artist himself was interred at his beloved church in Mariakerke, although his funeral service was held at the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul on 23 November 1949. Ensor had grown familiar with Roman Catholic doctrine during his time at school. It is obvious from all his writings that the artist was far from a militant free thinker, but – like most of his friends in Brussels and Ostend – he was certainly not religious either. He was an amused, if occasionally acerbic, outsider. It is true that there are more than a few works in which Ensor chose to identify himself with Christ (as did Gauguin), including *Calvary* (1886?) and *Ecce Homo* and *Christ Among the Critics* (1891).<sup>43</sup> Equally, however, it would be impossible to argue that every time Christ appears in Ensor's oeuvre, he was intended as the misunderstood artist's alter ego.

It is not until *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* (1887) that Ensor linked Redon's hallucinatory images with the technique and palette of Monet. While Ensor used brown tones to represent the barren plain across which the first human couple flee, the beige and grey shadows – the intermediate tone that he used in the underdrawing (including that of *The Oyster Eater*) to model volume and space in the traditional way –



now disappeared for good. Above the horizon, we see the brightest blue sky that Ensor had painted so far. The combination of light blue with light green, pink and an overwhelmingly intense yellow is extremely striking. Walther Vanbeselaere rightly called this Ensor's most Impressionist painting (although it was Vanbeselaere who started the entirely undocumented rumour that Ensor and Guillaume Vogels 'must' have visited London in 1886 or 1887 and that they discovered Turner there).<sup>44</sup> After the example of Monet and the French Impressionists, the painting is executed in loose touches, directly onto the white surface of the canvas with no underpaint.

Ensor's discovery of Redon's hallucinatory images also explains why he not only denied his debt to French Impressionism but also attacked the Impressionists themselves, who were little more at the end of the day than 'superficial brushers' (*'brosseurs superficiels'*).<sup>45</sup> 'I was erroneously numbered among the Impressionists, pleinairist painters, attached to light tones.... The Impressionist movement left me fairly cold. My

experiments are also far removed from the broad facility of Claude Monet, a jovial and sensual painter, who works in greasy layers. A lazy colourist.... A rather vulgar vision.'<sup>46</sup> What was important to Ensor was 'to express passion, disquiet, struggle, pain, enthusiasm and poetry, feelings so beautiful and so grand'. These were the qualities that the Ostender also admired in the music of Wagner and even in the vision of an artist such as Antoine Wiertz, who was grandiose if at times pictorially weak.<sup>47</sup>

Although Ensor never set out his artistic views systematically, it is possible to infer his thinking at the outset of his career and to tie it in with his philosophical and ideological views. His ideas can be understood in the context of the artistic agenda of the avant-garde in late nineteenth-century Belgium. Furthermore, we can test Ensor's views against the articles that friends and acquaintances would publish in the successive issues of the French magazine *La Plume* that were dedicated to the artist in 1898. In light of Ensor's correspondence with the authors of these texts,



DETAIL OF FIG. 173  
James Ensor,  
*The Temptation of  
Saint Anthony*, 1887

they may be considered – at least to some extent – as ‘authorised’ interpretations of his art. It would be useful at this point to summarise Ensor’s artistic opinions: (1) art must be a source of rapture, just as life should end as a ‘beautiful phosphorescent dream’; (2) art must be much more than a superficial naturalistic representation, but observation and representation remain crucial, even when they lead to the creation of illusions; (3) innovation is a goal to be pursued for its own sake, ‘down with the sacred routine!’; (4) the exploration of different ‘*manières*’, styles, varying subjects, genres and techniques ought to promote this artistic renewal and rapture.<sup>48</sup>

*Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise*, and above all the hallucinatory drawing *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, both dating from 1887, show how Ensor wished to create illusions by, as he would admit a few years later, trying out the most opposing styles.<sup>49</sup>

Analysis of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* shows that Ensor began with the uproariously cruel scenes above and to the right of the saint’s head, in which

naked women flay crucified men alive. The style of these scenes is close to the Rembrandtesque ‘tissues of light’ from *The Aureoles of Christ* of 1886. It is clear to the naked eye, and confirmed by letters to the Rousseau family, that Ensor constructed *The Temptation* by combining fifty-one single and double sheets from a sketchbook into one large composition.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the drawing as a whole was not originally planned and the artist decided at some point to lend internal coherence to it by placing Saint Anthony at the centre. The saint is incessantly threatened and enticed to abandon his faith in God. Ensor depicted several processions and other scenes around him, in which various sources of inspiration are brought together: lower left we find dogmatic bourgeois gentlemen in top hats and with ridiculous inscriptions (‘*frites*’, ‘*boudin*’, etc.); above them is a group of comical militia-men and demons; and, higher still, a slightly more difficult to read microcosm of insects and images of modern disasters, such as train wrecks and crashing hot-air balloons. Moving clockwise, next to a weeping

Christ (wearing the feathered hat of the Belgian Civic Guard) we see a temple (for occult gatherings?), from which a further procession of weird musicians and puppet theatre characters sets off. At the bottom, we make out a group of hideous naked people, who seem to come straight from a late Gothic scene of Hell. Ensor presents an iconographic blend of medieval monsters, exotic demons from the Far East and elements from popular culture, while also trying out various stylistic 'manners'.

The artist wrote to the Rousseaus that his aunt Mimi had carefully pasted all the small sketchbook sheets onto a large canvas. What she thought of these naive, caricatural, refined, droll, disrespectful and indecent scenes is not known. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* attracted little attention at Les XX in 1888, so Ensor exhibited the drawing again in February 1889. Some critics described Ensor, in comparison to Félicien Rops, as 'a swanzeuger [joker] whose grotesque and tasteless productions are nauseating'. In a more considered response, Jules Destrée wrote in *La Jeune Belgique*: 'James Ensor presents the case... of an artist of great value... exasperated by the slowness of the fame due to him... [who] no longer dreams of anything but injuring.... He therefore invents monstrous fantasies, devotes himself to the grotesque and the incoherent... [and] takes delight in the stupidity of the beholders....'<sup>51</sup> It is interesting that vehement critic and champion alike connected *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* with the comic Brussels tradition of *Zwans* exhibitions and their Parisian counterpart *Les incohérents*. Events were organised in both cities (and elsewhere in Europe) at which the work of established, conservative academicians, as well as progressive innovators, was ridiculed. This resulted in occasionally Dadaesque pictures, such as a snow-white canvas with the title *First Communion Procession in the Snow*, a still life ('*nature morte*' in French) with a skull, entitled *Nature Très Morte*, and similar absurdities. The Belgian photographer Louis Ghémar painted a more or less Ensorian parody of *The Last Honours to Counts Egmont and Horne* (1864) by Louis Gallait. But Ensor too found himself parodied at the *Great Zwans Exhibition* (1885) and the *Exposition Universelle burlesque* (1887), organised by his former comrades at L'Essor. A certain Franc Masson ('Freemason') submitted the painting *Hareng Saur* in 1885 (Ensor later co-opted the title – 'Pickled Herring' – as his nickname) and one 'Jensor' exhibited a parody of *Christ Walking on Water* in 1887.<sup>52</sup> It goes without saying that Ensor's own art is steeped in burlesque humour – from the small, narrative drawings he sent to Mariette Rousseau in 1883, to a satire on Rubens's preference for 'plump women' in *A Famous Person, Jef Vogelpik and Paul Rubens Ogling Plump Women* of 1938. But it also contains a not inconsiderable amount of irreverent, anarchic satire, such as the previously mentioned weeping Christ in the Civic Guard's hat who, according to the artist's notes in the exhibition catalogue, is coming to the aid of Saint Anthony.

The same anarchic spirit emanates from Ensor's etched and painted depiction of *The Gendarmes* who guard the corpses of two rebellious Ostend fishermen (1888 and 1892 respectively). Louis Ghémar had already painted the aforementioned parody *The Last Honours to Counts Egmont and Horne* in 1868, after Louis Gallait's work of 1851. Some liberals viewed the two Dutch aristocrats (not entirely accurately) as martyrs for liberty. They were beheaded in 1568 in the lead-up to the revolt of the Low Countries against Habsburg Spanish rule, and Gallait's painting shows the Brussels civic militia bidding farewell to their severed heads. Ghémar found it amusing to replace the heads with those of two pigs on a butcher's counter. In Ensor's case, the two national heroes from the past are substituted with victims of modern-day repression. A praying nun recalls the baleful alliance of Church and other conservative forces that Ensor had pilloried in his print *Doctrinal Nourishment* (1889).

FIG. 10  
James Ensor,  
*The Soul of Sorrow*  
(self-portrait with  
figures), 1915, pencil  
and coloured chalk  
on prepared panel,  
24.5 × 19 cm, private  
collection, courtesy  
Gallery Seghers,  
Ostend

FIG. 11  
James Ensor,  
*The Virgin of Consola-*  
*tion*, 1892, oil, gold  
paint, coloured pencil  
and pencil on prepared  
panel, 48 × 38 cm,  
Museum of Fine Arts  
Ghent – Flemish  
Community Collection







Many of the friends and acquaintances whom Ensor persuaded to write about him and his art in *La Plume* considered a significant proportion of his oeuvre to be the work of a *pince-sans-rire* (a deadpan humorist). In light of Ensor's anarchic visual boisterousness and his blending of drama, tragedy and nonsense, we should also ask ourselves whether the depressive intentions attributed to some of his self-portraits have not been exaggerated. *The Skeleton Painter* (1896) was famously based on a portrait photograph of Ensor in his attic studio, from which the artist took his own figure, brandishing a paintbrush at his easel, and turned it into a small, standing skeleton painting a picture. Does this not make the work a satirical image *par excellence* of the eccentric, modern artist? Just as the *Self-Portrait with Flowered Hat* (1883 and 1888) is an image of the artist as *pince-sans-rire*?

In a letter of 1888 to the Rousseaus, Ensor asked after their son, '*le diable Ernest*': 'I would be very happy for him to send me new ideas for the big, extravagant composition. Mine are faded and weighed down with fatigue and tension.' Ensor also wrote directly to his friend, ten years his junior, whom he occasionally addressed as 'Bourry' or '*Maître*', signing off as 'Piou' or '*son chien*' ['his dog']. In some of these texts, Ensor developed a literary equivalent to the wild delusions he depicted in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and similar compositions: 'The devil Bronze hung from our roof, raging and howling, swaying about without affection and casting his shrill farts into the wind. I saw him scratching himself and quacking, his hair bristling, full of bile and bitterness, and, I think, insincere yet moving reproaches and complaints. He spoke of you, of the XV making horrible threats and waving deaf

FIG. 12  
James Ensor,  
*Abstract Composition*,  
undated, watercolour  
on paper, 17 × 22.1 cm,  
private collection

FIG. 13  
Marlene Dumas,  
*Klaus Kinski Meets  
Ensor, Andy Warhol  
Meets His Maker*,  
2002, watercolour on  
paper, 46 × 46 cm,  
private collection

FIG. 14  
Jan Toorop,  
*Self-Portrait with  
False Nose*, 1879,  
oil on paper on  
panel, 35 × 14.5 cm,  
Kunstmuseum,  
The Hague

FIG. 15  
Charles Mertens,  
*Ensor's Art/The Dried  
Herring*, 1885–1890,  
oil on panel, 40 × 32 cm,  
private collection







bells, bizarrely connected to a cracked guitar filled with spoiled fruit and rancid cheese that stank to high heaven. He puffed up his soft pink cheeks, against a grey linen background garnished with bright green. His belly was mixed in colour, his big toes neutral, his back canary. But that was not the worst.<sup>53</sup>

He then went on to describe comically characterised soldiers, processions, omelettes, dogmatic, liberal supporters of vivisection, monsters, a cry of 'long live modernity!' and yet more demons.

Ensor's penchant for the macabre has sometimes been linked to the death of his father in 1887 and to the many skeletons that were uncovered during the large-scale building works carried out in Ostend in the 1860s. Yet the macabre was already very much in fashion towards the end of the nineteenth century, to such an extent that there was actually a 'Cabaret de l'Enfer' in Montmartre in 1892, where Parisians could dine beneath a ceiling adorned with terrifying plaster demons. Iconography of this kind had largely disappeared since the sixteenth century, banished, as it were, to the world of popular religious prints, until a revival began at the end of the eighteenth century. Like many of his contemporaries, Ensor revered the hideous beauty of Goya's prints and of his painting *Time and the Old Women* (1808/1812) in the museum in Lille.<sup>54</sup> His interest in John Martin's mezzotints, especially *Paradise Lost* (1825/1827), the Gothic repertoire of Antoine Wiertz and the cruel pornography of Félicien Rops were all part of a general revival of macabre iconography in the works of Odilon Redon, Arnold Böcklin, Max Klinger, Franz von Stuck, Alfred Kubin, Edvard Munch, Ernst Josephson and many others at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe.<sup>55</sup> Their frightful grotesques, along with Ensor's, were cherished and analysed by: the Parisian *homme de lettres* Jean Lorrain; the father of the Venice Biennale Vittorio Pica; and the leading (and occasionally over-imaginative) historian of Bosch, Bruegel, Rembrandt, Goya, Munch, Ensor and Beckmann, Wilhelm Fraenger.

Ensor absorbed the most diverse *manières* like a sponge. Two aspects are crucial to the way he handled his inspirations: he radicalised them while almost systematically blending the ghastly with the comical, the creepy with the droll. The 1889 *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (or, to give it its full title, *The Striking Down of the Rebel Angels and the Seven-Headed Dragon*) is almost a parody of late Gothic scenes of Hell – as, for that matter, are *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and *Tribulations of Saint Anthony* (1887). However, Ensor

FIG. 16  
Edvard Munch,  
*Golgotha*, 1900,  
oil on canvas,  
80.5 × 120.5 cm,  
Munchmuseet, Oslo

pp. 28–29: FIG. 17  
James Ensor,  
*The Entry of Christ into  
Brussels in 1889*, 1888–  
1890, oil on canvas,  
252.5 × 430.5 cm,  
J. Paul Getty Museum,  
Los Angeles





is so carried away in *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* that the picture seems to take on an abstract-expressionist character in places. 'I am still very happy with *The Fall of the Angels*', Ensor wrote to Mariette Rousseau, 'But it can only be an artist's success. The colours are very nice and there is a swirling movement, but no doubt the public will fail to notice.'<sup>56</sup>

So successfully did Ensor take the macabre iconography that was popular in the late nineteenth century and make it his own, that today we immediately associate it with his work. All the same, the mask motif is undoubtedly his most noteworthy contribution to modern art, even though the Polish artist Witold Wojtkiewicz also played with similar, surreal motifs, and Ensor's art has rightly been compared with the mask-like expressiveness of Edvard Munch's figures.

*The Astonishment of the Mask Wouse* (1889) provides an enlightening demonstration of how Ensor exploited the inherently ambiguous nature of the popular carnival mask. Pieces of clothing, musical instruments, hats and several carnival masks are laid out on the floor. It is a still life, and might have been no more than that. But Ensor also has a masked figure loom up on the left, apparently surprised, while two more masks appear at eye level on the right. The figure in

the centre could be another person, a man or a woman with a mask over their face. It is not possible to tell, but by mixing masks and figures, all the masks seemingly come to life. The status of these creatures is not certain, although a comment in a letter to Mariette Rousseau in April 1889 clarifies Ensor's intention: 'I am working on a painting of blind-drunk, wallowing masks. It works perfectly and the colour is very beautiful.'<sup>57</sup>

The mask made its entry in Ensor's work via the miserabilist iconography of *The Scandalized Masks* (1883) and also appears in the work of Henry De Groux, Fernand Pelez and Eugène Laermans, but did not assume its expressive and surreal, modernist guise until 1887. What Ensor discovered in the mask was a motif in which he could combine his 'favourite pastime: making others illustrious, making them ugly, embellishing them' with his lifelong love of 'exquisitely turbulent' images.<sup>58</sup>

Writing in 2005, Max Hollein stated that 'Ensor's work seems so invigorating and fresh, so new and exciting. ...which probably has something to do with a number of trends in today's art: the pluralism of styles, the return to the figurative and the narrative, simultaneously painting and drawing, ornamental tendencies, meaningful content, humour, and the return of the grotesque. All this already existed in the work of Ensor.'<sup>59</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eugène Demolder, *James Ensor* (Brussels: Paul Lacomblez, 1892), 13–15; 'une série de femmes coquettes' and 'des études d'un naturalisme un peu sauvage'. Demolder served as a justice of the peace and wrote art criticism and stories, including a prose re-telling of paintings by Bruegel.

<sup>2</sup> 'Je suis bien heureux que que que que [...] vous daignez vous rappeler de quelques-uns de mes airs de piano [...]. Je me suis souvenu de quelques motifs des Nibelungen. Je les joue mal et sur un mauvais piano.' Jean-Philippe Huys (ed.), 'Avec le noble crayon...' *Lettres de James Ensor à la famille Rousseau* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2021), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Herwig Todts, 'James Ensor: My Favourite Room' (in the collection catalogue of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which will be published in 2025).

<sup>4</sup> In his review of the 2017 Ensor exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, Robert Hoozee's friend Timothy Hyman took issue with my attempt to approach 'Wahrheit und Dichtung' critically: Timothy Hyman, 'James Ensor and Luc Tuymans', *The Burlington Magazine* CLIX (1367), February 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the biographical facts, see: Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor: Chronicle of His Life 1860–1949* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds 2020). This publication is basically a reissue of the first volume of Xavier Tricot, *James Ensor. Leven en werk. Oeuvrecatalogus van de schilderijen* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2009), expanded to include a selection of excerpts from Ensor's letters to Ernest Sr, Mariette and Ernest Rousseau Jr. Tricot does not indicate, unfortunately, which facts he no longer deems accurate.

<sup>6</sup> Ben de Pater and Tom Sintobin (eds.),

'Koninginnen aan de Noordzee. Scheveningen, Oostende en de opkomst van de badcultuur rond 1900', in *Rythmus. Jaarboek voor de studie van het fin de siècle 2* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> 'pendant l'été tout entier, Ostende s'affirme la plus belle de ces capitales momentanées du vice qui se pare et du luxe qui s'ennuie'. Emile Verhaeren, *James Ensor* (Brussels: Librairie nationale d'Art et d'Histoire G. Van Oest & Cie, 1908), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Huys 2021, 234. Following the death of his father, Ensor asked Professor Ernest Rousseau to translate a letter for him into English, in which he asked his relatives in England for access to the necessary documents relating to the inheritance.

<sup>9</sup> Huys 2021, 428 (letter of 1 September 1896): 'Je suis toujours cloué au magasin et serai très heureux quand la saison sera finie.'

<sup>10</sup> Huys 2021, 114–232.

<sup>11</sup> Xavier Tricot, 'Préface', in Stéphanie Moris, *James Ensor: Miousic!* (Lormont: Editions Le Bord de l'Eau; Brussels: La Mulette, 2015), 8: 'Son art connaît un tournant décisif [...]. Patrick Florizoone agrees with this.

<sup>12</sup> Libby Tannenbaum, *James Ensor* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951) is the most important source for an autobiographical interpretation of Ensor's work. Herwig Todts, *James Ensor, Occasional Modernist. Ensor's Artistic and Social Ideas and the Interpretation of his Art* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018), 15–18 (Status quaestionis of Ensor Research: Biography).

<sup>13</sup> Karel Jonckheere in conversation with James Ensor, (6 August 1936). <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/12/13/ensor-jaar-vrt/> (accessed 24 July 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Eric Min, *James Ensor. Een biografie* (Amsterdam: Meulenhof; Antwerp: Manteau, 2008), 29–30 ('Kartonnen dozen').

<sup>15</sup> Anthea Callen, *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 52 et seq., esp. 89 for the types of 'carton'.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hoozee, exhib. cat. *Het landschap in de Belgische kunst 1830–1914* (Ghent: Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1980), 10–13. Francis Carette, exhib. cat. *Natures de peintres/Schildersignatuur: Boulenger, Artan, Rops, De Braekeleer, Vogels, Ensor* (Brussels: Musea Tentoonstellingen vzw, 2005). Herwig Todts, exhib. cat. *Oostende. Ensors denkbeeldige paradijs* (Ghent: Tijdsbeeld, 2024), 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Huys 2021, 11 et seq., 109 et seq. Mitche's first letters to 'Ma toute chère Madame Marietta' and the drawings that James had already sent to Brussels in February testify to a warm friendship.

<sup>18</sup> Huys 2021, passim.

<sup>19</sup> 'le géant des XX, le Rubens de la modernité, le chef de nos néo-peintres [...] un novateur déplaçant la vision des choses et les éclairant d'un jour insoupçonné! Il brutalise de sa main puissante la beauté d'antan, [...] il la déshonore, la flétrit, la chasse dans le sein de l'Académie, [...]. Bravo Ensor! Ensor for ever! Chez lui rien n'est petit. Ses mal-adresses sont gigantesques [...].' Gustave Lagye, 'L'art jeune: Exposition des XX', *La Fédération Artistique* 11 (19), 1 March 1884.

<sup>20</sup> 'accessoires pour exprimer la futilité de notre époque'.

<sup>21</sup> 'travestissement moderne [...] sublimes horreurs de la grande modernité'.

- <sup>22</sup> 'Hosannah! Christ est ressuscité! Ce lampiste, c'est le porte-lumière de l'avenir! M. Ensor, l'a enfanté, non sans douleur, et de sa demeure dernière, feu Manet, prié d'en être le parrain, a envoyé sa procuration.'
- <sup>23</sup> 'ces énormes stupidités vous réjouiront'. Huys 2021, 165–67 (letter of 4 March 1884).
- <sup>24</sup> 'Vous faites du paysage? C'est de la farce le paysage!'
- <sup>25</sup> Jane Block, *Les XX and Belgian Avant-Gardism 1868–1894* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984).
- <sup>26</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World. A Conflict Between Market and Self-Expression* (Cologne: Dumont Verlag, 1997).
- <sup>27</sup> Huys 2021, 253. Regarding naturalism in Europe and Belgium, see Herwig Todts, 'Le naturalisme: introduction à l'historiographie et à l'interprétation d'une mode', in Herwig Todts, Dorine Cardyn and Nathalie Monteyne, *Tranches de vie. Le Naturalisme en Europe 1875–1915* (Ghent: Ludion, 1996), 9–31.
- <sup>28</sup> Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism. Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 12 et seq. Susan M. Canning, *The Social Context of James Ensor's Art Practice. 'Vive La Sociale!'* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 103–61.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Hoozee, 'Gustave Courbet op de Gentse salon van 1868', in Claire Van Damme and Paul Van Calster (eds.), *De wagenmenner en andere verhalen. Album Discipulorum Prof. Dr. M. De Maeyer* (Ghent: Rijksuniversiteit, Seminarie voor Plastische Kunsten in Europa, 1986), 82–89. Jean-Philippe Huys and Dominique Marechal, *Gustave Courbet en België. Realisme van levende kunst tot vrije kunst* (Brussels: MRBAB; Milan: Silvana Editoriale Spa, 2013). Regarding Ensor's admiration for Belgian followers of Courbet, see: Todts 2018, 417–34.
- <sup>30</sup> 'Je reviens de Lille. J'ai vu le musée. Il m'a étonné. Il y a là de magnifiques paysages de Jordaens. Courbet m'a stupéfié, son Après-dînée à Ornans est un chef d'œuvre – sans exagérer –, cela vaut Rembrandt. Millet et Corot deviennent bien malades à côté. [...] C'est à cent lieues de Courbet. A propos de Courbet, je ne veux plus regarder de Courbet chez les marchands de tableaux de Bruxelles. Les gredins les fabriquent sans honte et le pauvre peintre porte tout cela sur les reins. Je suis content de l'avoir vu à Lille. Je le connais bien maintenant. C'était un grand artiste.' Huys 2021, 209–10. Xavier Tricot (ed.), *James Ensor. Lettres* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1999), 153–54. The letter to Dario de Regoyos is dated December 1884, but that does not appear correct. The passage on Courbet is identical.
- <sup>31</sup> Todts 2018, 86, 91, 97, 112. Ensor's *Lamp-Lighter* (1880) was wrongly compared for many years to Manet's *Fifer* (1866), while the highly significant relationship with Jules Bastien-Lepage (see note 26) was overlooked.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Messieurs, Vous avez eu tort de refuser La Mangeuse d'huîtres. Il n'est pas trop tard pour réparer le mal. Je compte sur votre impartialité', AMVC/Letterenhuis Antwerp. The identification of *The Oyster Eater* with *In the Land of Colour* (Tricot 2020, 25–26) is based on an error. Ensor sent the three paintings to Antwerp on 14 July, with an accompanying letter. The exhibition catalogue mentions the two works that were displayed.
- <sup>33</sup> The history and canonisation of *The Oyster Eater* will be fully documented in the *Online Scholarly Catalogue* of the KMSKA's Ensor collection.
- <sup>34</sup> Todts 2020, 206–208. The drafts are held in the KMSKA archives, inv. 2708A.
- <sup>35</sup> Francine-Claire Legrand and Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, 'Lettres de James Ensor à Octave Maus', *Bulletin der Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België* 15 (1–2), 1966, 21.
- <sup>36</sup> 'Tandis que Manet et ses disciples ont poursuivi plutôt la vérité d'effet dans les outrances et les violences de la lumière, nous voyons ici M. Ensor et d'autres réussir surtout dans une annotation plus calme, [...] les nôtres savent mieux tenir compte de tout ce qui dans l'atmosphère, donne aux tonalités leur harmonie et leur valeur.' Lucien Solvay, 'Les XX', *La Nation*, 24 February 1886.
- <sup>37</sup> Serge Goyens de Heusch, *Het impressionisme en het fauvisme in België* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 1988).
- <sup>38</sup> 'Je suis abruti et extrêmement éreinté de peindre [...] la peinture m'absorbe absolument et ne me laisse un moment de repos. C'est un tourment continu. Je travaille, au moins, 9 heures par jour. Quand j'ai fini, je suis fatigué et bon à rien [...] les derniers tableaux ne sont pas mauvais.' Huys 2021, 214.
- <sup>39</sup> Verhaeren 1908, 113. The manuscript of 'La Liste de mes œuvres' is in the KMSKA archives.
- <sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Fraenger, 'James Ensor. Die Kathedrale', *Die graphischen Künste* 49 (4), 1926, passim.
- <sup>41</sup> 'l'artiste étranger qui a été le plus contesté à l'exposition'; Odilon Redon, *L'Art moderne* VI, 3 October 1886, 313.
- <sup>42</sup> Herwig Todts, *Goya, Redon, Ensor. Grotesque Paintings and Drawings* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2009), 9 et seq., Todts 2018, 342–53. The fact that Ensor gave the earlier date of 1885 to his most ambitious drawings, *Raw: Christ Shown to the People and Alive and Radiant: The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* shows that he was determined to conceal the debt he owed to Redon.
- <sup>43</sup> Todts 2018, 147–60.
- <sup>44</sup> Walther Vanbeselaere, exhib. cat. *Retrospective James Ensor* (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1951), 15.
- <sup>45</sup> James Ensor, 'Réflexions sur quelques peintres et lanceurs d'éphémères' (1911), in Hugo Martin (ed.), *James Ensor, Mes écrits ou les suffisances matamoresques* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1999), 36–38.
- <sup>46</sup> 'On m'a rangé à tort parmi les impressionnistes, faiseurs de plein air, attachés aux tons clairs. [...] Le mouvement impressionniste m'a laissé assez froid. [...] Mes recherches sont également éloignées des larges facilités de Claude Monet, peintre jovial et sensuel, manieur de pâtes grasses. Coloriste facile. [...] Vision assez vulgaire.' Letter from James Ensor to Jules Du Jardin, 6 October 1899 in Tricot 1999, 271–72.
- <sup>47</sup> '[...] elle ne peut exprimer la passion, l'inquiétude, la lutte, la douleur, l'enthousiasme, la poésie, sentiments si beaux et si grands'. Letter from James Ensor to Pol de Mont, December 1894 in Tricot 1999, 125.
- <sup>48</sup> Todts 2018, 39–94, 197–270.
- <sup>49</sup> Letter from James Ensor to Pol De Mont, December 1894 in Tricot 1999, 125; 'j'ai étudié alors attentivement les manières les plus opposées'.
- <sup>50</sup> Kimberly J. Nichols, 'Transcending Tradition: James Ensor's Innovative Drawing Process in "The Temptation of Saint Anthony"', in Susan M. Canning, et al., exhib. cat. *James Ensor, The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 65–85.
- <sup>51</sup> 'James Ensor offre le cas [...] d'un artiste de grande valeur [...] exaspéré de la lenteur de la gloire due [...] ne rêve plus que de blesser [...] Il invente alors des fantaisies monstrueuses, se voue à des grotesques et aux
- incohérences [...] réjouit de la stupidité des spectateurs [...].'* Both quoted in Susan M. Canning, *A History and Critical Review of the Salons of Les Vingt, 1884–1893* (*A Thesis in Art History. The Pennsylvania State University* 1980 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), 245.
- <sup>52</sup> Patrick Florizoone and Herwig Todts, 'James Ensor et le burlesque', in Véronique Carpioux, et al., exhib. cat. *Zwanze, Fantaisie & Burlesque, de Louis Ghémar à James Ensor* (Namur: Musée Félicien Rops, 2018), 135–81. Daniel Grojnowski and Denys Riout, *Les arts incohérents et le rire dans les arts plastiques* (Paris: Editions Corti, 2015). Daniel Grojnowski and Bernard Sarrazin, *Fumisteries. Naissance de l'humour moderne 1870–1914. Anthologie* (Paris: Omnibus, 2011). Eliane Van den Ende, *Ghents: Humor als Belgische identiteit* (Ghent: Artha, 2022).
- <sup>53</sup> 'Je serais extrêmement heureux s'il m'envoyait de nouvelles idées pour la grande composition extravagante. Les miennes sont défraîchies et alourdies par fatigue et tension.' And also 'Le diable Bronze s'est suspendu à notre toit, rageur et hurlant, se balançant sans affection et jetant au vent ses pets stridents. Je l'ai vu se grattant et coassant, les poils hérissés, plein de fiel et d'amertume, de reproches et plaintes peu sincères, je pense, mais émouvantes. Il a parlé de toi, du XV proférant d'horribles menaces en agitant des sonnettes sourdes bizarrement accouplées à une guitare fêlée remplie de fruits gâtés et de fromage rance puant souverainement. Il gonflait ses bajoues roses, très tendres, sur fond gris de lin persillé de vert vif. Son ventre était de couleur mélangée, ses orteils [de couleur] neutre, son dos [de couleur] canari. Mais ce n'était pas le plus terrible.' Huys 2021, 247–50.
- <sup>54</sup> Todts 2009, 75 et seq.
- <sup>55</sup> Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1930) still makes for inspiring reading. Felix Krämer, exhib. cat. *Dark Romanticism from Goya to Max Ernst* (Frankfurt am Main: Städel Museum; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012) offers a useful survey. Pamela Kort, *Comic Grotesque. Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870–1940* (New York: Prestel; Munich: Neue Galerie, 2004) provides the context for the success of Ensor's grotesques in Germany.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Je suis toujours très content de la chute des Anges, mais cela ne pourra être qu'un succès d'artiste. Il y a une très belle couleur et un mouvement tourbillonnant, mais le public ne distinguera pas sans doute.' Huys 2021, 280.
- <sup>57</sup> 'Je fais un tableau représentant des masques vautrés ivres morts. Cela marche parfaitement et la couleur en est très belle.' Huys 2021, 271–72.
- <sup>58</sup> See <https://kmska.be/nl/ensor-beantwoordt-de-proust-questionnaire> (accessed 11 July 2024).
- <sup>59</sup> Max Hollein, 'Foreword', in Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein (eds.), exhib. cat. *James Ensor* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Schirn Kunsthalle; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 9. See also: Susan Canning, 'Hareng Saur/ Art Ensor/Kunst Vandaag', in exhib. cat. *Susan Canning, et al., Hareng Saur. Ensor en de hedendaagse kunst* (Ghent: Ludion 2010), 11–23; Peter Schjeldahl, 'The ID Factor. James Ensor's Irrreality', *The New Yorker*, 6–13 July 2009; Holland Cotter, 'From Ensor's Curiosity Shop, Nightmares of Gruesome Beauty', *The New York Times*, 25 June 2009; Carolina A. Miranda, 'Object Lesson: When James Ensor Turned to Skeletons and Satire', *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 2014.



# Ensor's Anarchism

Timothy Clark

The Ensor exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) was for me the event of 2016.<sup>1</sup> It had been twenty years since Ensor's last show in London, and another sixty years before that since the Leicester Galleries' retrospective of 1936 (the artist was still alive at that time, but the handful of years around 1890 when most of his best work had been done must already have seemed remote). The painter Luc Tuymans chose wonderfully for the 2016 exhibition – thirty paintings, fifty merciless drawings and prints – and Antwerp and other Belgian collections lent with touching generosity. I hope the Belgians will forgive me if I say that looking at Ensor in the Academy struck home as hard as it did partly because the paintings seemed to connect so deeply, and so variously, with the line of French art from Delacroix to Odilon Redon. That was the art from which Ensor drew his strength. I know the painter was fond of saying in his later years that '*J'entends ignorer mes influences*', and '*Paris m'est totalement inconnue*', but he did not expect anyone to believe him. His imagery was rooted in the traditions of the Low Countries, yes, with Bruegel and Bosch as constant companions, but as a painter – as a colourist, as a manipulator of impasto – Ensor spent his life dreaming of Delacroix, Monticelli and Moreau, and of what the Impressionists had done, especially the high-speed Manet of the 1870s. I am sure he must at some point have seen early Cézannes – *The Orgy*, perhaps, or *Achille Empereur*, or a *Temptation of St Anthony* – and thought about repeating them in the key of late Turner. But Delacroix was always the presiding genius. *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the 2016 show was a wild précis of Delacroix's *Apollo* ceiling (with Bruegel in attendance). *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* drew from the same source. The great anarchist *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889* – too big and fragile to travel to London, but represented by an unrepentant etching Ensor did of it six years later (only the blood-red banner reading 'Vive la Sociale'

had been suppressed) – recast Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* as a mass-society *Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople*.

Perhaps it is true that an artist's influences should not interest us much (Ensor's wish to drop the subject has my sympathy) unless what they give rise to in the work we are looking at is baffling yet immediately persuasive; and at the same time an achievement that, once seen, seems to upend our view of the tradition being drawn on – putting that tradition in a new light. This is what a good Ensor does. Who, without *The Intrigue* (perhaps a better translation is *The Conspiracy*) (Fig. 144) or *Skeletons Fighting for the Body of a Hanged Man* (Fig. 18), would truly have grasped how much it had mattered to French painting throughout the nineteenth century – and still mattered in the age of Picasso and de Chirico – that the ordinary, daily, material life of modernity be seen to be haunted by the unreal, the deathly, the disguised, the predatory, the phantasmagoric? The famous tagline Walter Benjamin borrowed from Leopardi – '*Fashion: Madam Death! Madam Death!*' – seems made for the world Ensor shows us.

Look again at *The Intrigue* and *Skeletons Fighting*. What is most stupendous (and Boschian) about them is their ability to convince us that horror and absurdity are familiar events, behaviours we all recognise from our daily round. Granted, the colour and touch Ensor brings on to support that intuition do both hover on the edge of the showy. But in the years around 1890, that edge was where a renewed modern Realism seemed possible. Garishness and matter-of-factness were faces of the same coin – never more painfully than in pictures like these. Which of the two concepts just tried on for size – garishness and everydayness – applies, for instance, to the charity-shop outfit of the figure on the left in *Skeletons Fighting*? Or the mouldy yellow fur of the man in *The Intrigue*? (His mask-face is as frightened and disconsolate as a face in painting has ever been.) Or the ward-doctor whites belonging

FIG. 18  
James Ensor,  
*Skeletons Fighting  
for the Body of a  
Hanged Man*, 1891,  
oil on canvas,  
59 × 74 cm, Royal  
Museum of Fine Arts  
Antwerp – Flemish  
Community Collection





FIG. 19  
James Ensor,  
*The Astonishment  
of the Mask Wouse*,  
1889, oil on canvas,  
109 × 131 cm, Royal  
Museum of Fine Arts  
Antwerp – Flemish  
Community Collection

pp. 36–37: FIG. 20  
James Ensor,  
*Skeleton Arresting  
Masks*, 1891, oil on  
canvas, 33 × 55 cm,  
The Phoebus  
Foundation, Antwerp

to the hanged man? (The ‘CIVET’ pinned to the corpse’s chest is presumably the kind King Lear asked the apothecary for, ‘to sweeten my imagination’. The line of dried blood leading from tongue to placard is happily unreproducible.)

I know that once one starts describing a good Ensor it is hard to stop piling on gory detail. But this is not what happens in front of the real thing: the paintings are not chambers of horrors. Their detail may regularly be disgusting or delectable (almost in the way of Baudelaire’s *Une Charogne*), but by and large it is firmly contained, almost neutralised, by the whole painted rectangle – that is, by the ordinarieness of the masqueraders’ surroundings, and the sober underlying view of bourgeois society being proposed. What makes *Skeletons Fighting* so chilling, to put it another way, is the grim seedy decency of the picture’s colour: the force of its ice-cold blues, greens and whites, one of the blues entombing a skull staring up at us reproachfully from ground level; and above all the schoolroom joylessness of the picture’s floorboards and back wall. No theatre of cruelty has ever been provided with a less glamorous stage. Ensor’s whole sense of space in these 1890 pictures is unerring. The nastiness and pathos of his bourgeois undead would be infinitely more dismissible – easier to shrug off as whimsy – if Ensor had not, in ways just described, so completely realised the rooms and bric-a-brac and dismal ‘hangings’ in which his maskers seek their thrills. (Art is part of it. There is a painting where the skeletons all huddle for warmth round a wood-stove, one of them clutching a painter’s maulstick and palette.) In the third of the great 1890 paintings lent by Antwerp to the 2016 show, *L’étonnement du masque Wouse* [Astonishment of the Mask Wouse]<sup>2</sup> the room is enlivened by an evanescent green-and-pink Oriental landscape, with birds of paradise and mystic lilies, the kind Ensor’s art-world particularly treasured. ‘Étonnement’ here – the title is Ensor’s, given when he showed the painting at the Salon des XX in Brussels – is difficult to translate. The masqueraders are certainly not astonished by their own or anyone else’s behaviour – that is surely Ensor’s point – just disoriented, maybe interested for a moment, then bored, resentful, smug, sneering, nihilistic. A critic in *La Jeune Belgique* in 1890 struck the right note: Ensor’s colours, he wrote, reach back essentially to Goya’s, and so does his whole view of life. ‘He puts us in mind of the accursed line of Maldoror and Rimbaud.’<sup>3</sup> He has given us a new set of *Black Paintings*, re-imagined by a cackling Van Gogh.

Yet there is tenderness in Ensor – an unmistakable fellow feeling for his marionettes. He would be an immensely lesser artist (as would Goya and Rimbaud) if there were not. *The Intrigue* is drenched in pity – almost to its detriment, but not quite. Those who care about Ensor as an artist have always been fascinated by the length of time he lived on after his six or seven years of inspiration – on until 1949. He became, I would say entirely knowingly and deliberately, a ghost or simulacrum of himself, more and more accepting the role of





## COLOPHON

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Front cover image  
James Ensor, *Masks Mocking Death* (detail),  
1888, oil on canvas, 81.3 × 100.3 cm,  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York,  
Mrs Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1951

Back cover image  
James Ensor, *The Entry of Christ into  
Brussels in 1889* (detail), 1888–1890,  
oil on canvas, 252.5 × 430.5 cm,  
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Endpapers front  
James Ensor, *The Docks at Ostend* (detail),  
1900 or 1904, oil on canvas, 58.3 × 73.3 cm,  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp

Endpapers back  
James Ensor, *Adam and Eve Expelled  
from Paradise* (detail), 1887, oil on canvas,  
206 × 245 cm, Royal Museum of Fine Arts  
Antwerp – Flemish Community Collection